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A Golden Autumn

By
Hector, Mrs. Annie (French)
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Author of "A Fight with Fate," "Found Wanting,"
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1897

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A GOLDEN AUTUMN.

CHAPTER I.

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LONDON was very full, Parliament had reassembled after the Easter recess, and "all the world" had returned to its town mansion with renewed appetite for pleasure and for business.

It was a bright morning, and the tide of life in the streets had not yet reached its height, when two gentlemen nearly ran into each other at the corner of Charles Street,—one turning sharply towards Piccadilly, the other descending the hill at a good pace towards Pall Mall. The former was a tall, large-framed man, with a strong face and dark-grey eyes. He had a soldierly carriage and an air of great distinction. The latter was shorter and slighter, with little or no colour, reddish hair, and light eyes. He was clean shaven, and as he smiled with evident pleasure, his rather wide, firm mouth expressed kindness and humour.

"Why, Rivers!" he exclaimed, while the other cried, "Preston, by Jove! I was—I am on my way to look you up."

They shook hands with great cordiality, and eagerly exchanged question and answer.

"I heard vaguely last night that you had come back. I was going to call on Lady Mary this afternoon to find out where you are," returned Preston.

"We have taken a house in C—— Square for three months. Come along! I am on my way home to luncheon. Mrs. Rivers will be delighted to see you. She has heard of you often. She has an enormous admiration for writing-men."

"Thanks. I shall be very happy." They walked on together down Waterloo Place, along Pall Mall into St. James's Park, and so into the Belgravian quarter, talking with much interest of their doings in the last three or four months.

"I was awfully sorry not to have been in England when you were married," said Preston. "They tell me you have been so lucky as to find not only a wealthy, but a charming wife."

"Fortune has certainly given me more than I deserve. It is well for some of us that the fickle dame wears blinkers. My wife is a capital little soul. Wonderfully ignorant of the world."

"She is not the worse for that, Rivers."

"No—I suppose not. She is a baby in some ways, but a most observant, keen, young person in others. She has been brought up exclusively by women and among women. Her notions of men are very curious, but decidedly flattering," and he laughed good-humouredly.

"I suppose if women knew us as we really are, it would be bad for us."

"Not so sure! After all, we were made for each other. Women want us a deuced deal more than we want them. It is hard to circumvent Nature. Eh! Preston?"

"Impossible! Nevertheless, I should prefer a good woman idealising me, to knowing me as I am. I am afraid, Rivers, you are not a chivalrous party."

"Perhaps not; still, I'd do a good deal for a woman or a child. But I have never had much to do with either. Never was given to falling in love, though I had one or two sharp attacks years ago. Have you been away all the time since we met last?"

"Not quite. I have been rambling along the south coast of the Mediterranean and also in Corsica. There are some very curious ruins in that island that puzzle me completely. I wonder they are so little known. I was recalled about

a month ago by the death of my father. Poor old fellow, he had been paralysed for a long time."

"Hope he left you a pot of money?"

Preston smiled and shook his head. "He couldn't do that; but *I am* better off."

"Here we are," said Rivers, pausing at a house midway on the south side of the square, the windows of which were full of flowers.

"I hope Mrs. Rivers has not gone to lunch with her aunt. You know her people are thoroughgoing banking bourgeois. Her father was the head of the Sherrington Bank,—Raynor, Briggs, and Boyton. It's a big manufacturing place, and I fancy they have no rivals; but my wife——"

The door was here opened wide by a solemn-looking man in black, and Rivers paused in his speech, motioning Preston to enter.

It was an ordinary London house; the hall and staircase narrow as compared to the size of the rooms, and a conservatory on the first landing showed a profusion of flowers and ferns.

"Mrs. Rivers at home?" asked the master of the house.

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Rivers is at luncheon."

"Come along, Preston," and Rivers threw open the dining-room door, preceding his friend, and exclaiming, "Celia, I have brought a chum of mine to be presented to you."

A girlish-looking lady rose from her seat at the head of the table, a girl rather below middle stature, but, though very slight, her figure was round and free from angles; her bright chestnut hair, abundant and fluffy, was fastened back by a lilac ribbon tied round her head; under her straight, delicately marked brows a pair of large, soft hazel eyes, well fringed, looked gladly forth as she recognised her husband; a small, insignificant nose and wide, red-lipped mouth, pathetic in repose, but now showing a brilliant row of teeth as she smiled a welcome, completed a face which, though irregular,

was attractive. She wore a lilac muslin morning dress much trimmed with lace and ribbons, and her small fingers were crowded with sparkling rings.

"Your chum is very welcome," she said, coming forward with outstretched hand.

"This is Preston, George Preston, of whom you have heard me speak."

"Ah! yes. So glad to see you, Mr. Preston. I have read two of your delightful books, and tried another, but it was beyond my reach!" She shook hands with him cordially, while a gentleman, who had been sitting on her right and had also risen, exclaimed, "Hullo, Derek!" and stretched out his hand to greet the host.

"Why, Riversdale! I did not know you were in town. Delighted to see you."

"Why, I have come up on purpose to see how you and Mrs. Rivers stand the cares of matrimony. I was away in Northumberland, with old Grantley, when I heard you had arrived. Preston, this is an unexpected pleasure. From what remote quarter of the globe have you turned up?"

The *partie carrée* placed themselves at table, and luncheon proceeded with lively talk and ready laughter.

Lord Riversdale was very like his cousin and heir presumptive, but shorter, broader, older, more good-humoured looking, and much less distinguished,—more of a country gentleman than a man of fashion, and supposed to be a determined bachelor. Mrs. Rivers was surprised and even a little vexed to find herself more at home with him than with her husband.

"To be sure," she thought, "I don't care whether I please him or not, that is a potent calmant." Meanwhile, her guest talked of hunting, politics, club gossip, topics unknown to her. She waited for a pause, having always plenty to say for herself.

"I hope you don't dislike country life?" said Lord Riversdale, turning to her. "Do you ride to hounds?"

"I never tried, and I do not think Derek has much hope

of teaching me ; but I love life in every form, and fancy I should enjoy it in the country. I had a note from Aunt Sarah, this morning, Derek," addressing her husband ; " she has heard of a charming place to be let or sold near Tunbridge Wells ; rather a bargain, too. It belongs to a Mr. Carter, who is member for some place in the north ; curiously enough he has married a former school-fellow of mine. There are beautiful gardens, and——"

" Tunbridge Wells ?" interrupted Rivers. " Oh, that would be a mere citizen's box. If I let fly at a stray partridge, I'd bring down my neighbour's favourite rooster, and be brought before the magistrates as a bad subject."

Mrs. Rivers laughed. " It is a pretty country round Tunbridge Wells, and very convenient for town. Mrs. Carter is coming to see me, so she will tell me all about it."

" Do you know anything of Carter ?" said Rivers to Preston, who was a good deal in political society.

" I have met him. He got in for Oldcastle last year. He is an advanced Liberal, a clever man, and a politician in the rough ; might be a troublesome fellow. They say he worked in the mines, and a little coal-dust clings to him naturally."

" He has managed to turn it into gold-dust," cried Mrs. Rivers ; " and I suppose he has some heart, for he married Milly Saunders after her father had died a bankrupt and left his family without a penny. I like a man who makes a disinterested marriage of that kind."

This speech was received in total silence for a moment, and then Lord Riversdale remarked,—

" Yes. I respect the man or woman who casts aside any mercenary ideas in matrimony."

" Of course, people must have money," said Mrs. Rivers, gaily ; " but it's of no consequence who has it, so long as it's there." She spoke in utter unconsciousness, so thoroughly did she consider as her husband's what belonged to herself ; so it seemed to Preston, who was a keen and habitual observer.

"I would not be drawn into an acquaintance with these people, if I were you, Celia," said Rivers, coldly. "Carter seems to be an objectionable type of man, and ought to be kept in his place."

"What is his place? He must have worked hard and been very steady; why should he not reap the fruit of his toil, and have the position he has earned?"

"Your wife is a sound Liberal, I see," said Preston, smiling indulgently on his bright young hostess, who seemed to him very charming.

"Indeed, Mr. Preston, I do not know what I am," she exclaimed. "My mind swings to and fro like a pendulum. I sympathise with the poor and lowly, and think it is a shame they should be chained down to their original station, do and deserve what they may. Then I delight in the idea of long descent, and lovely ancestral homes, and elegant chivalrous men and women. The image of their best-looking forefathers, and, can you say foremothers?"

"You can say anything you like, when you say it so well," said the earl, smiling.

"Why, Riversdale! I never heard you flatter any one before," cried Rivers, with a slightly contemptuous laugh, which brought the quick blood to his wife's cheek.

"Don't be ill-natured," she exclaimed; "true or not, it is pleasant to hear."

"You are a philosopher Mrs. Rivers."

"Oh, don't call me Mrs. Rivers. As you are Derek's cousin, you may say Celia."

"A thousand thanks, my dear Celia," he replied.

"Why the devil is she so familiar?" thought Derek.

"But you have idealised the English aristocracy considerably. You will be disappointed with Riversdale. It is rather new. An unfeeling great-grandfather rebuilt the hall *de novo* a hundred years ago. You'll be charmed with Damer Court, and we shall be charmed to welcome you."

Celia's fair young face was radiant with the pleasure these words gave her.

"She fancies this acceptance by the head of his house will please Derek, but his pride is of the crooked kind," mused Preston; "though he is not a bad fellow."

"Well, I have a lot to do; for I want to go down to Riversdale on Friday, so I must bid you good-morning," said the earl.

"Yes, I fear we have kept you from your drive," said Preston, and both gentlemen rose.

"Are you going to call on Mary Damer?" asked Rivers.

"I should like to do so, but I fear there is hardly time. I promised to take my aunt out to drive at four."

"Pray, try and manage it. I may meet you there," urged Rivers, his brow contracting slightly.

"Very well; I will try."

Good-byes were exchanged and the men left the room. At the door Rivers paused and looked back at his wife; with a coquettish little smile, she made a movement to hold out her arms to him. He laughed, shook his head, and departed.

Having bid his guests good-bye, Captain Rivers hailed a hansom and drove to one of the new range of mansions adjoining Cadogan Place, where he ascended to the third story, and asked "if Lady Mary Damer was at home." He was immediately admitted. A tall, willowy woman, slight and colorless save for a pair of very large dark eyes, rose from a writing-table in the window of a pretty comfortable room, and came forward with a look of kindly welcome.

"Ah, Derek! How glad I am to see you!" she exclaimed, her quiet eyes lighting up with pleasure.

"Thanks, my dear cousin. I have been longing for a confidential talk with you; but you were out the only day I could manage to call, and I was not at home when you came to see Celia." Lady Mary had taken a low arm-chair as she spoke, and Captain Rivers placed himself on a sofa near and almost opposite her.

"Now you must tell me all your news. I can hardly believe you are a steady married man. Why did you not write to me during your wanderings? I seem to have lost sight of you altogether. You have had a long honeymoon,—nearly five months."

"Oh, as to letter-writing, you know I rarely write to any one except yourself, and I have been on deuced hard duty. Celia has an enviable thirst for sight-seeing, and, by Jove! we have done Italy most thoroughly. My brain is one wild confusion of pictures and churches and museums, and God knows what. *She* enjoyed it all immensely, however, so I don't suppose she will ever want me to go back again. She knows the country blindfold and can manage by herself. How is Damer and the youngsters?"

"George has been remarkably well since he recovered the attack of bronchitis that frightened us so much in January. Indeed, looking back for the last five or six years, I see that he has steadily gained in strength. I am very glad I persuaded him to take this flat. He stays longer in London, and takes up the ravelled social skein, renews old acquaintances, and makes new ones. Then he does not feel 'out of it all.' Now tell me, Derek, how is it with you? You look well, so I trust the tremendous experiment has been successful?"

Captain Rivers laughed, a laugh not quite free from embarrassment, and said, "Oh, I have been rather a lucky fellow; and I am an ungrateful beggar, I suppose, but I am bored now and then. I really think I miss the excitement of my debts, of wondering who will be worrying me next, and whether I shall get a tolerable haul on the next race. Life is hung on C springs for me now, and the wheels so admirably greased that I never feel a jolt! But if we can get a nice place in a good hunting country, it will be a great help." His voice was rich and deep and his accent refined.

"Yes; you do not care much for town life; but does Mrs. Rivers care for the country?"

"It seems to me she cares for everything, for and against, you know. She is always on the go, delighted and disgusted every hour of the day; she constantly reproaches me with my cold indifference. I wish, Mary, you would take her in hand! It would be one more service added to the many you have already done me!"

"How do you mean, Derek?" Her large eyes darkened with the earnest attention she gave his speech.

"Well, teach her how to dress. She wears the most ghastly gowns. I know they are all wrong; but I'm hanged if I can tell her how to make them right. She somehow puts on too much of everything. And then—don't think me a confounded sneak to grumble in this way behind my wife's back, but you are the only creature I can trust, and she is rather sensitive—you see she talks at the full pitch of her voice. It's not a bad voice, rather sweet and deucedly clear; but she always starts on some 'C in alt', I think singers say, and, by George! you'd hear her at the other side of a crowded room! She rattles on about every mortal thing she likes and dislikes, as if her hearers cared a rap for what she liked or thought! I didn't mind it all so much abroad; foreigners shout generally; but here it won't do!"

"This will all tone down after a season or two," said Lady Mary, gently.

"Oh, very likely! but then we have to live through those seasons, and, you see, she has been brought up by the worst kind of barbarians, civilised city barbarians! You don't know her Aunt Sarah! *my* Aunt Sarah, too, by Jove! No, I cannot stand that woman! You *must*, for my sake, come and meet her at dinner some day, and then you'll see she is a sort of hag that no fellow could possibly stand. If she were a regular typical hag,—with wild grey elf-locks, a broomstick, and a cauldron, and if she cursed the company at intervals,—she would be something distinguished. But there's a smug, suburban self-satisfaction about her, an uncertainty about her h's, a certainty as to the power of her money, that's

absolutely intolerable ! and this appalling female dines with us twice a week !”

“ My poor Derek ! could you not persuade Mrs. Rivers to lighten the punishment ?” asked Lady Mary, with a smile.

“ I shall try. But she is fond of this terrible woman. She says she acted a mother’s part to her, which consisted in putting her at an expensive second-rate school, where any well-bred instincts were suffocated ! I think she is very fond of Celia, and I fancy she is *not* fond of Mr.——”

“ Probably ! people *you* do not like, seldom are !”

“ But, Mary, I am awfully civil to the creature ! I am, by Jove ! Though I know quite well that she looks on me as a poor devil who owes everything to his wife. Then I suspect she is a mischief-maker ; she’ll set my wife against me !”

“ I am inclined to believe she can’t do that. It struck me that Mrs. Rivers is very fond of you, and I hope you are of her.”

“ Yes, yes ! I am all right. She is a pretty fresh little thing !”

“ You ought to speak more seriously, Derek. But I don’t think you ever cared much about women ; you don’t understand us a bit.”

“ N—no, though I am not so sure. At any rate, I am not a sentimental chap.”

Lady Mary looked at him with thoughtful, dreamy eyes, and sighed.

“ But I have always got on with women, and even made a fool of myself about one or two. I think I have been fonder of you than of any other girl. You are so sensible and real ! Though I don’t think I should ever have been what is called in love with you. You are too good or something.”

“ How very mortifying ! I expected at least an avowal of hopeless affection. Well, Derek, you must bear with the aunt at present, and gradually undermine her influence.”

There was a pause, during which Lady Mary looked thoughtfully, with a certain degree of compassion, at her kinsman.

"I have been looking for a lady's horse at Tattersall's this morning. They are asking big prices," resumed Rivers; "but Celia has a fancy for riding, though I do not think she will make much of it."

"Why, Derek?"

"Didn't begin early enough. Hasn't pluck enough. Still, I don't like to put her off, so I am going to make her a handsome present of a 'gee'—out of her own money!" and he laughed; there was a tinge of bitterness in the laugh. "By Jove, Mary, I have been a miserable spendthrift! and am properly punished, though, mind you, I believe Celia is a great deal too good for me! There, you have heard the last of my whimpering; but you will take my wife in hand, won't you, and train her in the way she should go?"

"My dear Derek! don't you feel that by doing this, by even attempting it, I should ensure your wife's deadly dislike? I must win her confidence first, and then—— I hope you have not recommended *me* as a 'guide, philosopher, and friend?' " interrupting herself.

"Well—not exactly. I did suggest——"

"I suspect you have done the mischief!"

"Oh, she will be sure to take to you! The women all like you."

"I hope she will, for——"

Here the door was thrown open and Mrs. Rivers entered. She wore a gown of grey gauzy material over pink silk, with an elaborately trimmed corsage, abounding in pink and white bugles and festoons of fine white lace. Her hat was extensive, and loaded with pink and white feathers; her pale tan suede-gloved hand held a parasol of pink silk covered with white lace, its ivory and gold stick studded with pink topaz, and a couple of pale pink roses were fastened at her throat. It was a gorgeous costume, and not unbecoming.

"Ah, Derek, I did not expect to find you here!" she exclaimed; then holding out her hand to Lady Mary, "I intended to have called long ago, but I have been very busy, and had such heaps of visits to pay."

"You are very welcome whenever you can come," said Lady Mary, kindly, as she drew a chair forward, and started the conversation by saying how pleased she was to see Captain Rivers looking so well and happy, at which a sort of cloud passed over the young wife's face, and she looked earnestly at her husband.

"He is very delighted to be back in London, I fancy. He got sick of sight-seeing; now, I was so sorry to leave Italy. *He* had seen it before, but it was all new to me, and I didn't want to come here. Then, of course, he was so glad to see you and his old chums."

"Yes. Derek and I were brought up like brother and sister, and I hope you, my dear Mrs. Rivers, will accept me on the same terms."

"I am sure you are very good, Lady Mary." A quick flush passed over the younger lady's face as she spoke. "I shall try not to feel like an outsider, but everything seems very strange to me as yet."

"Oh, you'll soon feel yourself at home," said Rivers. "I've been looking for a mount for you to-day. There's a nice bay horse at Tattersall's that might do, but I don't quite like his eye, and you must have a well-tempered animal. Do you remember the bay mare that I had broken in for you, Mary? What a curious temper he had! but he couldn't throw *you*. You must know, Celia, that my cousin is a first-rate horsewoman. She must come with us and help me to teach you. Eh, Molly?"

"I should not like to trouble Lady Mary. I shall be quite satisfied with *your* instruction, Derek," returned his wife, quickly.

"You are quite right, Mrs. Rivers!" Rivers rose and paced the room.

"I was writing to you when Derek came in just now," resumed Lady Mary. "I want to catch you before the toils of the season close round us all. Will you dine with us on the 29th? I think Riversdale will be in town."

"That will be capital! Of course, we'll come," said Rivers.

"I should be most happy," put in Mrs. Rivers, coldly. "I will look at our engagement list as soon as I go home."

"Pooh! nonsense, Celia. We haven't such a lot on hand. We are not more than a fortnight in town. I'd give up anything to have a cosy dinner with you and Damer, Mary."

"That can be easily managed," she returned, smiling. "You are going to make some stay in town, are you not?"

"Yes; we have taken the house in Chester Square till the end of July; by that time I hope we shall find something that will suit us in the country. Indeed, my Aunt Sarah, Mrs. Twiss, advises me to take a ready-furnished place with the option of buying, which is a good idea."

"Aunt Sarah has not advised *me* on the matter yet!" remarked Rivers, drily.

"It is a good suggestion," said Lady Mary. "You appear to have enjoyed Italy very much," she added, addressing Mrs. Rivers.

"It was quite too delicious!" cried that lady, and ran on praising the places she specially liked, the churches, pictures, statues, scenery, with some genuine enthusiasm, and a good deal of guide-book knowledge. She seemed to express all she had thought and felt with an abandon which surprised her hearer, who was accustomed to the self-suppression of hereditary social-training.

"You are going over old ground, Celia," broke in Rivers. "Mary has been in Italy, and done all the sights thoroughly."

"But such a long time ago, Derek, that I am glad to hear of them again. We must talk of these things when we are alone. I am afraid my cousin is a typical Englishman; his soul does not rise to art."

"Except music," returned his wife. "He is really fond of music."

"We have been keeping you at home in the most inconsiderate way," cried Rivers. "Come, Celia, let's be going. You might drop me in Pall Mall. I promised to meet my old colonel at the United Service Club."

"And I promised to call for Aunt Sarah to take her to the park; she will dine with us afterwards."

"Very glad to hear it," returned Rivers, hastily, "for the colonel wants me to join him and one or two of 'ours' at dinner."

"Why, Derek! are you not coming to Mrs. Tracey's ball? I could not go alone," said Mrs. Rivers, and there was a sound of tears in her voice.

"Of course not! I shall come back to escort you, and see that you have lots of partners," replied her husband, good humouredly.

"Is it not strange," exclaimed Celia, "although Derek really enjoys music, he does not care for dancing, not one bit! and I love it!"

"I know many men who love music, and yet do not like dancing. Well, if you will go, good-bye. I shall send you my invitation, however, as, among all the others, you might forget a verbal one."

The smart victoria, which Rivers had hired until their own establishment was organised, rolled away, and it was some minutes before either husband or wife spoke. At length Celia said, "That cousin of yours had no business to doubt that I had plenty of engagements, quantities, in fact."

"But she does not doubt you. Why should you fancy she does?"

"Did you not remark what she said about forgetting her invitation among *all* the others I had?"

"Nonsense! Don't let your imagination run away with you. Mary is incapable of these ill-bred insinuations. I do hope

you will appreciate her. She can be a most useful friend to you." His tone was contemptuous.

"I don't want useful friends," returned Celia. "Why should I?" and she tossed up her chin indignantly.

"Well, don't be a baby!" impatiently.

"Thank you!" she said, with sudden composure, and remained silent till they reached Waterloo Place, where Rivers left her, saying, "I'll be with you about ten or half past."

"To Bayswater, Mandeville Terrace," was his wife's order to the coachman, and the horses' heads were turned due west.

CHAPTER II.

CELIA RAYNOR was the only child of a provincial banker, who from small beginnings had raised a noble structure of wealth and influence, and, although he was joined by a couple of partners richer than himself, he was always the potent head of Raynor, Briggs & Boyton's Bank.

He did not long survive middle age, however, dying when his daughter was not yet fourteen. She had lost her mother when she was still a baby, and never knew how great the loss had been.

Raynor was never a very affectionate parent, but that he thought carefully of his little daughter and made all possible provision for her welfare, his will proved. By it she came in for all his fortune, less a few legacies.

Her guardians were her uncle by marriage, the late Mr. Peter Twiss of Liverpool, whose wife seemed to her brother an admirably clever and excellent woman. The other guardian was the shrewd chief partner in a high-class firm of solicitors who had always managed Mr. Raynor's business. It devolved, therefore, on Mr. Richard Ridley to look after the

property and see to the disposal of the handsome allowance fixed for the minor's maintenance.

Mr. Twiss died soon after the wealthy banker, so the care of her orphan niece fell largely on his widow. This duty she thought was amply accomplished by placing the little girl at the most costly school she could find. Here Celia passed four or five years happily enough.

Her quick intelligence made her a favourite with her teachers, while her tendency to domineer was condoned by her companions because of her generosity and good humour. Thus, a firm belief in her own wit and superiority grew up in her mind ; a bad preparation for playing a part in real life.

On leaving school she took up her abode with Aunt Sarah, and in her first season rejected three excellent young men who admired herself and her fortune with equal intensity. The following year she met Derek Rivers, who at first took very little notice of her.

Then a Lady Yoddrell, a distant relative of the Rivers family and grandmother to one of Celia's school-fellows, invited her to spend a week or two with her friend at her ladyship's dower house, in Hillshire. Here she again met Captain Rivers, and after a period of riding, picnicing, driving, and boating, during which he was kindly and pleasantly attentive, he proposed, and was accepted with somewhat trembling pleasure, for Celia was half afraid of so distinguished-looking and easy-mannered a man of the world, "who stooped to conquer" such an insignificant girl as his presence always made her feel herself.

Of course, Aunt Sarah offered a strong opposition to the marriage, and there was a tussle over the settlements. But Rivers was not exacting, and Celia not only declared she would never marry any other man, but insisted on certain moneys being settled on her intended husband, reminding her advisers that she had only to wait a year and a half and then she might marry without any settlement at all.

Finally, they were married, and started for Italy, where for a few months Celia was wildly, intensely happy.

Her husband was kind and caressing, and, though not given to fine speeches or sentiment, thoroughly appreciated her fresh, youthful charm. Above all, they were free from intimate friends or intrusive relatives, though they met and made enough acquaintances to save them from monotony, and consequent disenchantment.

By some instinct, for her reasoning powers were but partially developed, Celia half dreaded this return to London; she feared the influence of old acquaintances and near relatives over her husband. She was far too high-spirited a woman, too confident in her own merits, to dream of their looking down upon her. If they did, she felt she could laugh at them, for she had not escaped the tendency of her training, and felt that her fortune was too important a factor in the sum total of her position to be lightly regarded.

She therefore felt little or no dread of the Rivers family connection; rather a readiness to do battle on any provocation. The individual who inspired her with the greatest dread was Lady Mary. Had Celia known her as a member of her society, apart from all connection with Rivers, she felt she would have heartily admired her, and perhaps eagerly sought her acquaintance.

It was this appreciation which made her fear the effect of Lady Mary's influence on Derek, and especially the severe ordeal of contrast between herself and this graceful, quiet patrician woman, who was absolutely and calmly mistress of the position. Dress as she would, talk as she would, bejewel herself as she would, there was something unattainable in the superiority of her husband's kinswoman.

Celia, though greatly attracted to Rivers from the first, was not what is termed "desperately in love" with him before their marriage. Her pride was gratified by the idea of bearing the name and sharing the life of so distinguished and

agreeable a man. But Celia was not of the temperament which sees a possible lover in every male acquaintance. She never idealised her music-master or drawing-master, nor did she think a lover an absolute necessity.

She liked admiration exceedingly, and it piqued her that Captain Rivers in the early days of their acquaintance should pass her over with easy, good-humoured civility.

The change to attentions of the "flirtatious" order which he displayed when they met at Lady Yoddrell's "house party" was very delightful and gratifying, though she was not so unworldly as to believe him indifferent to her fortune; if she had been, "Aunt Sarah" would have enlightened her. Still, she had an instinctive feeling that Rivers was not a man who would sacrifice himself to a mere marriage of convenience,—an opinion which the passion of his kisses, when their recognised engagement permitted him that privilege, fully confirmed.

It was the first months of their happy life in Italy that woke the sleeping fire of her half-developed nature, and her dawning love for him grew into a strength and intensity that almost frightened her; to watch him as he spoke or moved, to sit quite still while he read or wrote, conscious only of his presence, was almost bliss enough; and as Rivers was naturally alive to the charm of youth, vivacity, and symmetry, he appeared to reciprocate her affection fully.

It says a good deal for Celia's moral force that, in spite of the legitimacy of her feelings, she made a steady effort to control and conceal them; she was more than half ashamed of the overpowering ascendancy her husband had gained over her without the smallest effort on his part.

As the days rolled by, a slightly restless doubt that he loved her in the same absorbing fashion grew upon and distressed her. Few women—certainly very few, if any, young women—can distinguish between passion and love, especially when the lover is kindly in nature and fairly delicate. Before they

returned to London, however, Celia at moments had disturbing mental suggestions that Rivers could get on remarkably well without her, if his men friends *and* Lady Mary were left to him,—that she was a mere toy, a petted indulged toy, but absolutely outside his real life and serious thoughts. Of course, she resisted these vague and uncomfortable impressions as morbid and unfounded, but, though dispersed to-day, they gathered their ghostly forces as thickly as ever to-morrow. The idea was intolerable; she knew she was worthy of better things, and yet could not see how to prove her worth.

This harassment made her impatient and intolerant, and often angry, with her heart's idol, because he did not see the better side of her character and would not try to do so. How was she to show herself in a true light to him? Did he care to know if she were a mere doll, or a true-hearted, sympathetic woman? This state of feeling was as yet only in the germ.

* * * * *

The following day Mrs. Rivers had finished luncheon, and was fastening a sprig of lily of the valley in her husband's buttonhole before he went out, when the footman brought her a card, saying, "The lady is in the drawing-room, 'm."

"Ah, Derek, it is my schoolfellow, Milly Saunders!"

"Who is she? Yes, I remember; the girl who married a miner!"

"I shall be quite glad to see her again. Will you come and be presented?"

"No—that is, yes. I'll have a look at your friend. What an ungodly hour to call!"

"She is an old chum, you know," cried his wife, and she ran up-stairs.

Opening the drawing-room door, she found herself face to face with a robust, dark-haired woman, high-coloured and richly dressed, whose laughing eyes and large smiling mouth seemed familiar, and recalled the memory of surreptitious tartlets and cheesecakes, toffee, and even pear-drops,—so low

does a taste for sweets drag down the "young ladies" of the most costly establishments.

"Don't you remember me?" exclaimed the visitor, in a loud, jolly voice.

"Yes, indeed I do! You are Milly Saunders."

"Exactly! Only I am not Milly Saunders now. I heard you were married, and I was dying to see you again. Why, you have turned out quite pretty and stylish-looking! You used to be quite a plain little thing."

"Thank you!" laughing, while she thought that Milly had developed into rather an appalling picture of prosperity.

"I met Mr. Carter soon after I left Miss Green's; then poor father died, and left us without a penny; he had been awfully robbed. So I married Mr. Carter. He is a big coal-owner, and can afford to be generous. He stood for Oldcastle last autumn, and came in with a fine majority. I've been having a first-rate time since I came up to town. It's great fun to be a member's wife. I'd advise you to put your husband into Parliament. I am sure you have money enough, unless people exaggerate."

"I do not know that it is altogether a question of money. I am not sure that Captain Rivers would care to be in the house."

"Law! my dear, *I* hadn't a penny, yet *I* can manage to make my husband do pretty well what I like; whereas, I fancy you had all the money, so you ought to have double weight."

"You have more force of character, Mrs. Carter," said Celia, smiling.

"I'm not so sure. However, I hope you and the captain will come and dine with us soon, and make Mr. Carter's acquaintance. He would have come with me, only the Home Secretary wanted to consult him about something; so I dropped him at the office as I came along. How is Aunt Sarah?"

"Very well, indeed, and looking very well."

"Law, Celia, how fond she was of you!"

"She was wonderfully good to me," said Celia, softly, while she saw as in a glass, though by no means darkly, the effect her school-friend would produce on Derek.

As she thought, the door was opened by that gentleman, who, in his admirable out-door get-up, seemed more imposing than ever to the admiring eyes of his wife, while she could hardly conceal the smile which crept round her lips at the look of dismay which came for an instant into his eyes.

"Let me introduce Captain Rivers to you, Mrs. Carter," she said, with tolerable gravity.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, I'm sure," said that lady, extending a large solid hand in a very tight glove, which Rivers took for half a second. "Your wife and I are having a real good talk over old school-days and the tricks we used to play, and I can tell you Mrs. Rivers was a ring-leader."

"Yes, these reminiscences are no doubt very interesting," said Rivers, coldly.

"Unfortunately, I am obliged to go. I have a hundred and one things to do. Could you manage to come and have a bit of lunch with me to-morrow, Celia? I haven't many days free."

"I am very sorry, but to-morrow I am engaged to Lady Mary Damer."

"Then you must fix your own day. Now we have met again, we *must* see a good deal of each other. Eh, Captain Rivers?"

"People never see much of each other in London," he returned, coldly.

"Your little wife was the pet of the school, I can tell you," cried Mrs. Carter, with an air of saying the right thing.

"Indeed!" and Rivers elevated his eyebrows.

"Well, good-bye for the present, dear," resumed Mrs.

Carter. "You'll let me know what day you can come to luncheon."

"Let me see you to your carriage," said Rivers, with ominous politeness, as he opened the door for the visitor's exit.

Having bestowed a kiss on Mrs. Rivers, Mrs. Carter departed, and Celia stood where she was in deep thought, her brow slightly wrinkled, with a pretty, puzzled look of trying hard to understand something, which often came to her unconsciously when musing on some difficulty; she was still musing when Rivers returned. He walked to the window, then turned and asked, "Were there many young females of that type at your school, Celia?" and came back to her, resting one knee on the chair beside which she stood. "If so, I wonder you managed to grow up the sweet little soul you are. You must cut that appalling person, Celia! I am a plain, unpretending fellow myself, but, by Jove, I could not stand *her*! You might as well invite a bar-maid from one of Speirs & Pond's refreshment rooms. Don't be offended, little woman." He drew her to him, and held her close, looking down into her soft brown eyes.

"I am not, Derek. I confess I am a good deal appalled myself, but I must not be unkind."

"The safest plan is to resist all attempts at acquaintance; promise this. I cannot have this creature and her coal-mining husband at my house."

"Very well; but I am afraid I am acting shabbily."

"Never mind. Shall you be ready to try the new phaeton with me if I come back for you at four?"

"I am so sorry, Derek. I should like to go with you, but I promised to drive with Aunt Sarah and return to dine with her, as you are dining out."

"Throw her over for me!" said Rivers, kissing his wife's little ear, which was turned towards him.

"I cannot, dear. I disappointed her yesterday. I must

keep my promise to-day. I would much rather go with you."

"So you say. If you did——"

"You know I would."

"You have no business to prefer any old woman to me. Now, I want the kiss that terrific female defrauded me of by coming at such an unholy hour."

"Ah, Derek!" exclaimed Celia, half a minute after, "I did not promise to pay it with compound interest!"

"Well, I must go out into the highways and hedges and seek a companion. It won't be difficult to find one."

Left alone, Celia mused a little on her own happiness, and resolved to disentangle herself from her too genial school-friend. Then she donned her out-door attire and sat waiting for the advent of Mrs. Twiss, who soon drove up in a fine, large barouche, clothed in crimson brocade and velvet with lace and jet and feathers and pasmenterie galore.

"Well, you naughty puss! I *was* disappointed to miss you yesterday, and I waited in till after four," was her salutation as Celia took her place beside her.

"I am very sorry, Aunt Sarah. You see I was obliged to call on Derek's cousin and great friend, Lady Mary Damer. I found Derek there, and had to stay longer than I intended. Then I took him to the United Service Club, and all that took time."

"I do trust and hope, Celia, that you did not call *first* on this Lady Mary. You must never forget what is due to yourself among that conceited, stuck-up set."

"Lady Mary is not what you could call stuck up. She is very gentle and simple. Derek thinks her a perfect angel."

"Then he has no business to. Let him leave angels alone, his own wife is angel enough for him!"

"I am afraid, aunt, he could not think me an angel," said Celia, laughing. "He is very nice and good, but I don't think an angel would suit him particularly."

"Nor I, either, my dear, considering the rigs he used to be up to. I only hope——"

"Never mind, Aunt Sarah. Let bygones be bygones. I don't wish to hear any more of them."

"All right; but if ever a woman was silly about a man, *you* are that woman, Celia."

"Well, if silliness makes me happy, what matter?"

"There's no use talking sense to you, child." A pause ensued.

"But you didn't answer my question. Who called first?" resumed Mrs. Twiss.

"Oh, Lady Mary; they did not come up to town for nearly a fortnight after we arrived. Derek evidently wants me to be very intimate with her, and says she would be a great help to me in choosing my court dress."

"Don't you give into that, child! You have as good taste as the best 'Lady Mary' among them; and, moreover, you have always had the means to exercise it. Who is that pasty-faced dowager in the old-fashioned carriage who bowed to you?"

"Oh! the Duchess of Bamboro. She is to present me, you know."

"Ah! yes, to be sure. Certainly your husband knows a lot of big wigs. She is some relation, isn't she?"

"I believe so," said Mrs. Rivers, a little impatiently. "He seems related to every one. We dined with her last Wednesday. I was rather bored. The people talked politics all the time, and Derek said it was a 'deuced bad dinner.'"

"Did he? Ah! I daresay *I* could give him a better; but about this Lady Mary. Don't you let her have a finger in your pie. I'll just let your husband know this early, that you can choose, as you can pay, for yourself."

"I hope you will not, Aunt Sarah. You don't know the impression such remarks make on Derek. He hates purse pride. You can't think how he despises it!"

"I daresay, considering *he* hasn't a purse to be proud of!"

"At all events," continued Mrs. Rivers, "you will not have a chance of annoying him, for he dines out, and cannot accompany me."

"Dines out!" repeated Aunt Sarah, with a little scream. "I don't think that's civil or respectful."

"Oh, nonsense, auntie! Captain Rivers knew nothing of your invitation; and in the meantime his colonel asked him to dine with some of his former chums, and of course he accepted."

"What, have you let him go and leave you to face the crowd to-night all by yourself?"

"No, certainly not! He returns to escort me."

"Well, Celia, take my advice, and don't let your husband fall back among his old bad companions. He'll be spending your money on the race course, and"—mysteriously—"worse! Just show him you won't have it."

Celia smiled a little sadly. "I do not fancy I could prevent it. But I am *quite* sure he will take better care of *my* money than ever he did of his own."

"Do you mean to say you cannot manage him? Why, I have had *two* husbands, and I knew what they did with every penny,—and the money all your own, too?"

"I don't care about that,—but—but I do wish I had the sort of influence over him that Lady Mary has."

"Is it come to that?" cried Aunt Sarah, with a flash of her beady black eyes. "Then I say Lady Mary is a minx!"

CHAPTER III.

THE excitement of Celia's presentation over, Rivers remembered his intention of asking Lady Mary to meet "Aunt Sarah" at dinner; the former had only caught a glimpse of that important personage at her cousin's wedding. Celia was exceedingly pleased at this proposition, hoping his objection to her aunt was fading away.

"Don't let us have an exclusively family party," said Rivers, as they consulted together after breakfast, one morning. "What with ourselves, the Damers, and your aunt, besides Riversdale, if we can catch him, we are all related or connected. I don't care much for asking Riversdale."

"But *I* should like him to come very much," cried Celia. "He is very nice to me, and Aunt Sarah would like to see him in the flesh. You know he was *not* at our wedding, and sometimes I think she doubts if he exists."

"It is irreligious of her to have any doubts. Isn't he registered in her sacred book, Debrett?"

"Come, come, Derek, don't sneer at Aunt Sarah; she is a little funny sometimes, but she has a good heart."

"I wish she would wear it on her sleeve, to assure us of its existence."

"Who else shall we have?" asked Mrs. Rivers, not noticing this remark.

"The rector from Riversdale is in town, and Gertrude, I believe; she is his eldest daughter. We used to be great allies in our school. She is a capital girl or woman. Gertrude never was very young."

"They are almost kinsfolk; but let us have them by all means."

"And Preston?"

"Oh, yes! He is quite delightful; I enjoy talking to him."

Rivers elevated his eyebrows and looked at her half smiling, half surprised. "Well, he is considered one of the most intellectual men of the day."

"No doubt. He likes talking to *me*. I feel that."

Rivers laughed. "It is a proof of his good taste at any rate," he said; "and what lots you always have to say."

"I have, indeed. I never have a chance of saying the half I think. I will write my notes at once."

"Then there's Lady Yoddrell. Ask her, Celia, to show you do not yet resent her action on my behalf. Eh! she did not do us a bad turn."

After a few changes the party was finally arranged.

Celia was ashamed of the nervousness with which she prepared for this entertainment.

Her spirit was too loyal, too courageous, to dream of suppressing a relative to whom she felt indebted for the only "mothering" she ever knew; yet "Aunt Sarah" was a source of profound discomfort to her.

She was too intelligent not to see the extraordinary difference between Mrs. Twiss and her husband, not to add his family.

What would Lady Mary think? What would Lord Riversdale say? Now, that pleasant peer was no fine gentleman. Nothing could be plainer and more unaffected than his manners. He loved sport and hated trouble, genial and ready to be amused, not by any means strait-laced; suspected, indeed, of having a "fair" reason for his persistent bachelorhood, he was, nevertheless, a thorough gentleman and a favourite with the best people among the upper ten.

Celia took some pains with her dress, remembering her husband's predilections. She chose a white lace and silk garment, which suited her well.

Unfortunately, Rivers came in rather late, dressed in a hurry,

and did not take the smallest notice of his wife's becoming toilette, a vexatious omission which put her a little out of tune.

Aunt Sarah arrived early. To Celia's joy, she had put on black velvet, adorned with much heavy, costly white lace. She was crowned by an edifice of gold guipure and red fluffy feathers, and held in her hand a big feather fan of the same warm tint.

"I thought you'd like me here to back you up, my dear, when your company came," said Mrs. Twiss, complacently; "as this is your first dinner-party, ain't it?"

"Oh, not exactly. We have had a few people now and then, but nothing big; and this is quite an informal gathering."

"Oh, I don't suppose you'd have anything big without *me*!" returned Aunt Sarah. "Captain Rivers may be as fine as fourpence, but he'd have uncommon little gilt left on his gingerbread, if it weren't for *you*."

"Mr. and Lady Mary Damer," announced the butler, thus saving Aunt Sarah from a sharp rejoinder.

Mrs. Twiss stopped suddenly, and gazed with profoundest observation on the new-comers.

Mr. Damer was a very thin, delicate-looking man, with a slight stoop, and only saved from extreme plainness by the sweet and noble expression of his face. Lady Mary was in black,—a demi-toilette of lace and satin, very simple and becoming, to which the grace of the wearer lent distinction. She also wore a few very brilliant diamonds; brilliant with the white radiance possessed by those gems which are to be found among the heirlooms of the older nobility and gentry.

"A gown you might get for eight or ten pound," remarked Aunt Sarah to herself, "only for the lace; and she had that by her, I daresay."

"My aunt, Mrs. Twiss, Lady Mary Damer," said Celia, presenting her new and old relatives to each other.

"Mrs. Rivers forgets I had the pleasure of meeting you at

her wedding," returned Lady Mary, taking the vacant place on the sofa beside Mrs. Twiss. "I suppose the details of one's wedding-day are never very clearly remembered."

"Well, now I think they are! I could tell you all about both mine, for I have been twice married, Lady Mary. At any rate, I should know you anywhere, though I remember you stayed a very short time. I was always very observant, and I have quite a remarkable memory," continued Mrs. Twiss. "But it was a very trying day. Mrs. Rivers was like a daughter to me, and it was very soon to lose her."

"Yes, such a parting must always be rather trying," said Lady Mary, gently.

Here Rivers came up. "A thousand pardons!" he exclaimed, shaking hands with Mrs. Twiss. "I was detained by some business, and only got here in time to dress with frantic haste, thanking heaven I had no back hair."

"Ah, it's easy to see you are a married man!" exclaimed Aunt Sarah, with a loud, jolly laugh, "or you would not have thought of *that*!"

"Well, Mary, I hope you are not tired," said Rivers, passing on. "It was lovely in the park, wasn't it?"

"What park?" asked Mrs. Twiss.

"Richmond Park," returned Lady Mary. "My cousin was trying a pair of horses for his phaeton, and asked me to go with him."

"Oh, that was his business, was it?"

"No; our drive was before luncheon."

"Miss Wilmot, Major Harford," called out the butler.

Celia went forward to receive the rector's daughter, whom she had not met before.

She was a tall, elegant-looking young woman, with a very fair skin, a bright colour, dark eyes, and grey but abundant wavy hair, and an air of complete but very quiet self-reliance. Celia felt as if she were years older than herself.

"I am charged with many apologies to you, Mrs. Rivers,

from my father. He was called away by telegraph, while I was dressing, to his old friend the bishop of Northborough, who is dangerously ill, and could not refuse. I thought it better to come on and explain to you, even at the risk of making your table uneven."

"I should have been very sorry if you had not," returned Celia, smiling kindly on her. "I don't care in the least if the table is odd or even, but I do care to make your acquaintance. I have heard of you so often from Derek."

"Thank you very much. I reciprocate your wish heartily," said Miss Wilmot, looking at her young hostess with evident interest.

"Ah, Gertrude! I am delighted to see you again; but where is the rector?" Miss Wilmot repeated her explanation. Then there was an affectionate greeting with Lady Mary, during which Lady Yoddrell and Lord Riversdale arrived, and Celia remained near the door talking with the latter. Lady Yoddrell recognised Mrs. Twiss at once in a very gracious manner, taking a seat beside her; but Mrs. Twiss was not quite content, as neither Miss Wilmot nor Riversdale had been introduced to her. "I wonder who will take me down to dinner?" she thought; "not the captain! I suppose he must take Lady Yoddrell."

"Dinner is on the table!" announced the butler, whereupon Celia, followed by Lord Riversdale, came across the room and introduced that peer to her aunt.

"I am to have the pleasure of escorting you to dinner," he said, offering his arm, which, with beaming smiles, Mrs. Twiss accepted, and on reaching the dining-room found herself on her host's left, facing Lady Yoddrell. Lady Mary paired off with Mr. Preston, and Celia with Mr. Damer, who was becoming a favourite with her.

Mrs. Twiss found the exalted head of the Rivers family a companion after her own heart. He appreciated good eating, liked a hearty laugh, and could tell a droll story with some

sense of humour. "He hasn't a bit of nonsense about him," was her comment afterwards to Celia. "I wouldn't mind asking him to dinner any day."

"I suppose all these things belong to the house?" said Aunt Sarah, indicating by a nod the dessert-service.

"Yes, they do."

"Ah, I thought so! they are rather a poor lot. You have a good bit of silver among your wedding presents. Still, Celia will have to buy more, and she will do it well; she is not the sort to spoil the ship for want of a hap'orth of tar."

"As my wife is so generous, I shall suggest her buying electric plate," said Rivers, nettled by the vulgarity of this speech. "It's a security against burglars, and the difference in price will enable her to present me with an additional hunter."

"Ah, Captain Rivers, if I were your wife——"

"Don't suggest happiness which is beyond my reach," interrupted Rivers, laughing.

"Is Derek consulting you about his stud?" asked Lord Riversdale. "I don't know how he'll be able to tear himself away from his charming wife, even for the fascinations of fox-hunting."

At this Aunt Sarah turned a beaming face towards the speaker.

"I'm sure you'd make a kind, good husband yourself, my lord."

"I like to hear you talk, Riversdale. Don't mind him, Mrs. Twiss; the woman never lived who could make him miss a meet."

"I'd rather believe his lordship than you, Captain Rivers. You are always laughing at some one."

"Quite right, Mrs. Twiss. There is a sober seriousness about me much more worthy of credence. Really, Derek must be the envy of every man with eyes in his head or blood in his veins. Mrs. Rivers is a most delightful little woman."

Whereupon Aunt Sarah rewarded "his lordship" by giv-

ing him some details of Celia's childhood, which, as some phrases caught her husband's ear, he hastened to interrupt.

"I say, Riversdale, I have got my leave extended till the regiment returns, about six months. Then, I fancy, we'll go to Aldershot."

"And I hope you'll quit the army, captain!" cried Aunt Sarah, emphatically. "I hope you don't expect Celia to go and live in a mud hut, or be trapesing after the colours. I always considered you pledged to 'sell out', from one or two things you have said."

"I wish you would tell me what they were," returned Rivers, quickly. "I never had any intention of degenerating into an idler, nor would Celia wish it. To me a soldier's life is the best of all."

"To go wandering about from post to pillar, with all your belongings in a few boxes, like gipsies, I can't bear the thoughts of it. You owe it to Celia to leave such a profession, such a life."

"Oh, it's not so bad. Wait till you come down to see us in our hut at Aldershot, and you'll see how jolly it is."

"I'm sure, Lord Riversdale, *you* agree with me that it's a shame to drag a creature like Celia from one miserable place to another, forcing her to spend her money in wretched country towns."

"That depends on what Mrs. Rivers thinks and likes," he returned, anxious to please both parties, as he saw that Derek looked annoyed. "Then there is no reason why your niece should not have a pretty country place somewhere in our own country, where they can come in the shooting-season or when Derek has leave."

"A country place!" exclaimed Mrs. Twiss. "Of course she might, or anything else she likes; but that is not what I call a home."

"Tastes vary. Some people like soldiering. Meantime, it is a career."

"A career, indeed! Why doesn't Captain Rivers go into Parliament and make a figure, like Mr. Carter, the gentleman one of Celia's school-fellows married? It's not very pleasant for a young woman to see one of her school-fellows, who is not a patch upon her in any way, going ahead of her."

"Is this Carter member for Oldcastle?"

"That's it," said Aunt Sarah, promptly, if not grammatically.

"Then," continued Riversdale, "I think Mrs. Rivers will not be disposed to envy his wife."

Here Major Harford addressed his host from the other end of the table: "Is it true that you are looking out for a hunting-box in some good country, Rivers?"

"Yes. We want a nice little place for the autumn and winter; can you recommend anything?"

"No; but Dacre here can."

Dacre was a young lieutenant in a light dragoon regiment, who was a family friend of the Rivers family and was sitting next Major Harford.

"Whereabouts is it, Dacre?" asked Rivers.

"It's about six miles north of Allerton, in Yorkshire, in a good hunting country and near moors. Bothwell Place, a nice old house, gardens, and first-rate stabling. It belongs to a brother-in-law of mine, who is obliged to go abroad."

"Yorkshire!" echoed Aunt Sarah; "why, that's miles and miles away. No one would ever see Celia at that rate. Why not have a nice house in town to come back to after your banishment in country quarters?"

"I think," said Lady Yoddrell, who had been in deep conversation with Major Harford, "the best thing to do would be to take my house, 'Mount Maurice,' in Hertfordshire. There is excellent shooting attached to the place, and you can rent any amount; an hour and three-quarters from King's Cross. I should not mind wintering in the south of France. I would not ask a high rent from friends; then, of

course, the place has very pleasant associations to you and to Mrs. Rivers."

Lady Yoddrell was an experienced dowager of the bony order, a shrewd woman, who had settled her children very successfully, and now schemed for scheming's sake. She devoted her energies in these later days to making "a purse."

"It would be so nice for dear Mrs. Rivers to run up to town for shopping; and you could always buy your fish at the station. Fish is a great difficulty in a country place. Then Mrs. Twiss could go down from Saturday to Monday, and have a nice, healthy change."

Here Rivers caught Preston's eye, and a slight smile passed over his face which did not escape his wife's notice. Then Riversdale recommended his cousin to try the neighbourhood of B——, their county town, when Celia looked at Lady Yoddrell and her aunt, and the ladies rose.

Aunt Sarah and Lady Yoddrell were soon deep in congenial talk, for, though widely separated in habits and associations, they had naturally many points in common.

"I enjoyed talking to Mr. Damer so much," exclaimed Celia, drawing a chair in front of the sofa on which Lady Mary and Miss Wilmot were sitting; "or, rather, listening to him, for I *can* listen sometimes, Lady Mary, in spite of what Derek says. He was telling me all about Damer Court and Elizabethan houses generally. I have really seen very little of England. I should like to travel slowly all over it, with such a guide as Mr. Damer."

"He is rather well up in the history of domestic architecture. You know, some years he was almost constantly in-doors; so we both read a great deal more than we otherwise would. I am afraid we do not deserve much credit. I hope you will begin your studies under Mr. Damer as soon as we return to the Court."

"Thank you very much. I quite look forward to paying you a visit."

"Our old rectory is pretty and old-fashioned, though not antique," put in Miss Wilmot. "I hope to have the pleasure of showing it to you. Lord Riversdale tells me he expects you in June. Of course, I love the old place so dearly that I am not a fair judge."

Here the gentlemen joined them, and young Dacre managed to secure a little talk with his hostess, whom he ardently admired.

"Shall you like country life, Mrs. Rivers?"

"I daresay I shall. I enjoy the country when I am there; but I have never lived in the country."

"Are you devoted to hunting?"

Celia shook her head. "I can scarcely ride; and I am afraid Captain Rivers has but little hope of making a horse-woman of me,—not beyond being able to canter along a road."

"It is refreshing to find a woman who does not overwhelm you with a lot of hunting slang, and is as keen, if not keener than yourself, on all turf topics."

"I must confess I feel my deficiencies deeply."

"Are you going to Lady Filmer's ball to-morrow night?"

"We are."

"Then do give me the first waltz."

"Not the first, Mr. Dacre. We dine out; so I cannot be sure when I may arrive.—Are you going to Lady Filmer's to-morrow, Mr. Preston?" she added, more to arrest his attention than expecting an affirmative reply.

"No, Mrs. Rivers. I am no dancer; so I will not cumber the ground,—I mean the floor."

"Why is it that so few men like dancing? not even those who love music. I fancy most women do."

"Most men feel they look ungraceful in dancing," said Dacre. "Anyhow, *I* delight in it."

"I fancy men have so many more means of exercise, outdoor exercise, that dancing seems tame to them. Whereas women——"

"Are pressing close on your heels," put in Mrs Rivers,

laughing, though the period of this story was nearly twenty years ago.

"Yes; you have almost appropriated lawn tennis, and joined the 'guns' in their autumnal tramps."

"I don't like the idea of seeing anything killed," said Celia, reflectively.

"That may be modified. The growth and variation of ideas is a curious subject."

"No doubt it is. Pray write a book or an essay upon it," exclaimed Celia, eagerly.

"What a tremendous task you suggest! Some ideas are exceedingly slow to develop, but change goes more quickly than growth. No idea of man's position could well be more modern than that of an old Italian philosopher, Pico della Mirandola, who wrote about three hundred and forty years ago of the dignity and characteristics of man. No one has gone beyond him."

"How delightful it must be to have read all you have. Where do you find all these wonderful books? I feel such an abyss of ignorance."

"Your time for study and mental assimilation has not come yet, Mrs. Rivers; be satisfied with your present. No forcing process can be applied to intellect."

"That means you think me a baby; so does Derek, I believe."

"Socrates and Plato were babies once," returned Preston, smiling; "and you know the essence of all wisdom is patience."

"I feel that is true; also, that I have not one little bit! When an idea occurs,—I believe I have a few,—I want to carry it out on the spot. I wish Derek was as fond of books as you are."

"Captain Rivers values books more than men of his stamp generally do."

"His stamp! Why, how do you classify him?"

"That is a very leading, not to say a dangerous question, Mrs. Rivers. Let me see. I fancy your husband is a physical man, both mentally and bodily."

"How can mind be physical?"

"There are no hard and fast lines in nature, and I always think there is a physical side to intelligence. The people who possess it are most useful to their country: it helps, too, to make a great soldier."

"But not a poet, I suppose?"

"It belongs more to understanding than to imagination. We are growing quite profound, Mrs. Rivers. You have frightened Dacre away."

"Oh! I hope not. Is it not curious that, although I am frivolous, at least people think I am, and I sometimes agree with them, I love to hear about things I can scarcely understand,—scarcely!—not at all, I fear?"

"You must possess your soul with patience. I foresee you will become a formidable philosopher in days to come."

Here Lady Mary and Miss Wilmot rose and came over to say good night.

"We are going to Mrs. Meredith's musical party," said Lady Mary, "and must not stay any longer."

"Very sorry. Miss Wilmot, as you are alone, would you come and lunch with me to-morrow? and I can drive with you anywhere you like. I suppose you have shopping and things to do?"

"I have, indeed. I accept your kind suggestion with pleasure."

"I hope you will allow me to call on you, Mrs. Twiss," said Lady Yoddrell. "We have some views in common, and an interest in common, too, in your charming niece; your hint about Egyptians is of great importance. I must say I am greatly annoyed by the neglect of my broker. It must be late; Lady Mary is going.—Good-night, my dear Mrs. Rivers; thanks for a delightful evening. Your aunt is an exceedingly clever, shrewd woman."

"Well, my dear, I suppose my carriage is waiting. I must say I think Lord Riversdale is A 1. Such a pleasant, cheery fellow. Ah! my dear, *he* is the man you ought to have had!"

"For shame, auntie, to suggest such an idea. I prefer the man I have."

"I don't think any one was bored to-night," observed Derek, when he returned from putting Mrs. Twiss in her carriage.

"I am glad you think so," said Celia, unfastening the flowers from her dress as they were alone.

"Yes; but you neglected your women guests too much for Preston. I should not have fancied he was your sort."

"He is the most delightful man I ever met."

CHAPTER IV.

THE week following, as Mr. and Mrs. Rivers sat together after a *tête-à-tête* dinner, waiting for the carriage to take them to a reception, Derek, who had been rather silent, said, suddenly,—

"I am going down to Allerton to-morrow to have a look at that place Dacre mentioned. Riversdale says he will come with me."

"How long shall you be away, Derek?"

"Oh, a few days, perhaps a week. We talk of looking at another place farther off on the borders of Durham. I heard of it yesterday."

"A week! that is a long time. You know we have several engagements."

"Yes, I know; but there are only a couple of dinners among them. You can write at once and say I am called out of town. As to the others, the Damers will be at most of them; so you go under Lady Mary's wing."

"I am not afraid to go by myself," said Mrs. Rivers, coldly.

"No, I daresay not. You are a plucky little woman ; but it would look better if you went with the Damers, considering how unknown you are. I should prefer your being with some of my people."

His wife did not reply at once, and her face clouded over.

"I shall be dreadfully lonely," she said, at last. "I think I shall go and stay with Aunt Sarah."

"No, no ; pray do not desert your own house. Have her to dine, if you like ; but Mary has promised to look after you. And, Celia, I wish you would observe how softly she speaks. Do you know, I heard you right across the room at Bam-borough House, last night ; every word, by Jove ! You should not let yourself get excited on every subject."

"Did I speak so loudly ?" she exclaimed, in some dismay. "I was quite unconscious of it."

"Just so. All I ask you is to think before you speak."

"Yes, I know I ought ; but it is so tiresome to stop and think when a lot of words are crowding to one's lips."

"Never was in that predicament myself. Your voice is pleasant enough, if you would pitch it a tone or two lower."

Celia was silent, and a pretty, puzzled little frown contracted her fair brow.

"Take my advice," resumed Rivers ; "cultivate Mary Damer. She is a deucedly clever woman, and inclined to be chums with you. You could not have a better model. She is a true-hearted woman, too. Damer's property was woefully encumbered when he proposed. My aunt, her mother, would not hear of such a marriage for her daughter, who might have made the best match in England if she chose. Then Damer, who was a great horseman and hunted hard, had a bad spill—was nearly smashed to bits. Whereupon Mary insisted on marrying him when he was scarcely able to sit up in an invalid's chair. She was a regular sick-nurse for three years.

She brought him back to life, however, almost to health, and has helped to nurse the estate as well as the owner."

There was a brief silence.

"Yes, that was true love, said Celia, thoughtfully. "I confess I envy Lady Mary her chance of proving the gold of which she was made."

"There are not many like her," observed Rivers.

"I think I could do a great deal for any one I loved," said his wife, in a low tone.

Rivers did not seem to hear her.

"My head aches," were her next words. "I should like to go to bed."

"The carriage is at the door," said the butler, entering.

"Does it matter much if we do not go to this party, Derek?"

"No; I don't fancy we'll be missed, and I hate these aimless crowds. Is the head very bad, little woman?" then, as she rose and turned towards the door, he added, in a different tone, "or is it a fit of the sulks?"

"Do you—*can* you think that?" she exclaimed, as she left the room quickly.

When Celia had got into her dressing-gown and dismissed her maid, she threw herself into an arm-chair and did battle with her despondency and uncomfortable impressions. Her heart seemed numb with fear as well as pain and mortification.

Lady Mary was indeed a terrible rival. All the more terrible because of the innocence of the "liaison" between her and Derek. Love was almost sure to change, friendship seemed to grow stronger with years.

How plainly she saw, how keenly she felt her inferiority to her husband's high-bred, noble-hearted cousin. She was a good woman. Celia did not doubt this for a moment. She was perfectly free from any low or vulgar jealousy. But, oh! what

would she not give, even life itself, to hold the place Lady Mary did in Derek's estimation. Could she ever attain to it? and her heart, her instinct, answered, No! She had begun at the wrong end. She should have won this before she became his wife. She ought to have refused the passing fire among the thorns, which was all he had to offer her, before she gave herself to him. "But I did not know. How could I know?" she moaned. "Even now I feel—I do not understand—I could be as loving, as devoted as Lady Mary, only I have not her manners, her superiority. She is ten or twelve years older than I am. How can I acquire such self-mastery as hers all at once? And while I am learning it, Derek will go on thinking me weak, conceited, common, frivolous. Once he comes to this conclusion, no height of mental or moral grandeur to which I might rise will ever reinstate me in his opinion. Reinstate! I never had any status with him. What shall I do? What can I do? I hate Lady Mary, though I know she is sweet and good!"

Celia wept convulsively for some minutes, then suddenly ceased, and dried her eyes.

"I cannot live and be miserable in this way. I shall die or go mad! I'll try and be like what he admires, or give it up, and forget everything in a whirl. Oh! Derek, if you only loved me as I love you! But you can't! you can't! Yet I deserve it! I know I do. Derek must not know of this despairing fit; and he thought I was 'sulking!'" She lay down, her bosom still heaving with the passion which had vexed her soul, expecting to lie long awake in troubled thought, but, unaccustomed as she was to pain or grief, she was exhausted by this new experience, and soon passed into dreamland.

Her sleep, however, was disturbed and unrefreshing. Next morning, therefore, she appeared pale and heavy-eyed at breakfast. Rivers was deep in a report of the latest turf squabble when she came into the room, and bid her a pleasant,

careless "good-morning," but when he had laid down his paper, he exclaimed, "My dear child, you don't look very brilliant. Head bad again?"

"It is better, thank you, much better. But I slept badly. I had dreadful dreams."

"What about?" asked Rivers, helping himself to some omelette.

"Oh! chiefly about you. I thought you had taken the place you are going to see without consulting me, and then, when I went down with you there, it was awfully lonely and ghastly, and my room was a dungeon. You were just locking me in when I awoke."

Rivers laughed. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself for thinking so badly of me, even in your dreams. Do you imagine I should condemn you to live in a place you didn't like?"

"No, I don't think you would."

"It would be bad for me if I tried, eh, Celia? Another cup of tea. Oh! I forgot to say, Riversdale is coming to luncheon at two. Go and drive round the park, or anywhere. The air will do you good. You look quite seedy. Not been vexing yourself about nonsense? Sure?"

"Oh, no. I shall be very glad to see Lord Riversdale. He is very amusing."

"He is a very good fellow. I must go into town early this morning. I want to see Dacre before I leave. By the way, what will you do this afternoon?"

"I have various calls to make, and then I think I shall dine with Aunt Sarah."

"I'd rather you'd dine with my cousin. Never mind; go to her to-morrow, and then go on to Lady Sherrard's ball. Anyway, don't mope."

He rose, and passing his wife he took her head in both his hands and, bending it gently back, kissed her brow. "Don't worry about trifles," he said; "you had better be guided by

me in all social matters," and he left the room, turning at the door to give her a parting nod.

Celia was no fool. She certainly looked after her husband, and sighed deeply. Then she rested her cheek on her hand for a few minutes, and, finally rising, she rang for the breakfast to be removed, and set herself to write some notes. Then desiring her maid to put on her out-door garments, and call a hansom, they went away to enjoy a walk in Kensington Gardens while the morning was fresh and cool, determining to disperse any morbid fancies and bring back the roses to her cheek.

An interview with her dressmaker followed, and when Rivers, with his cousin, arrived to luncheon, he found his wife quite herself, and in return to his query, "All right now?" she gave him a smiling "Quite right, Derek."

Luncheon passed over pleasantly enough. Poor Celia, forgetting her troubles, talked as eagerly as ever, laughing joyously at Riversdale's droll, dry remarks.

When Rivers turned back to repeat his "good-bye," her arms stole round his neck, and she told him to write without fail. He promised readily; but his last words were, "Be sure you go to Mary to-morrow, and ask her and Damer to dinner if they have an open day." Words at which Celia's soft, loving, brown eyes grew gloomy, and later she had a little struggle with herself before she could give her coachman the order, "To Lady Mary Damer's."

* * * * *

"Dine with me? Yes, by all means," cried Mrs. Twiss, when Celia made her appearance late that afternoon. "Pray, where is your husband gone to? And what has taken him away? Do you know the *real* reason?"

"Yes, of course," said Mrs. Rivers. "He is gone to look at that place we were talking about at dinner the other day."

"Hum! yes, I remember. Now, Celia, I hope you are not going to let him put you down anywhere in the wilds, without your own consent, as many a man before him has done, that,

so soon as his wife is well out of the way, he may be up to whatever rigs he likes? And his cousin, my lord, going with him? Well, I don't mind that. Lord Riversdale seems a real good sort of man. I wish you had met him first. He may be a bit older looking, and that ; but you'd be a countess, and at the top of the tree, and well you'd become it. Captain Rivers ought to think himself in the height of luck to have got money and good looks and everything in the one woman. Those white-faced, fine ladies are not a patch on my Celia."

"You need not fancy that Derek wants to get away from me," interrupted Celia; "he is not the sort of man to be tied to his wife's apron-string; and I do not wish him to be always hanging about me. As to poor Riversdale, if I had met him first, it would have made very little difference. He is a confirmed bachelor."

"Which means mischief!" observed Mrs. Twiss. "I do hate to hear of such selfish animals, that never care for mortal, —wife or child."

"Lord Riversdale does not give me the idea of being especially selfish."

"Oh, isn't he, though? for all, he is so pleasant and good-humoured. All men are alike. It's well for them young girls don't know what they really are, or they might whistle for wives and fortunes. They are all pretty much alike when they haven't a woman to take care of them. Still, I must say it's rather dull not to have a man about you some way."

"I should certainly miss Derek frightfully," said Celia, with a bright, sweet smile.

"Well, that's all right; but don't you fancy he is a saint. I was looking for rooms up there in Alexandra Terrace, beyond the Royal Oak, for my old friend Mrs. Mills, who is coming up for a few days, and what should I see on the drawing-room mantle-piece of one house but a photograph of Captain Rivers in a grand uniform, just his image; so I asked the landlady where she had got that. It had been left

by the last tenant, a very gay lady indeed, she said, and added that she had gone away to the continent last year. It seemed very strange," Mrs. Twiss was continuing, when Celia broke in,—

"Never mind, auntie, I am quite content with the present ; I don't want to know anything about the past."

"Well, more fool you ! I only want to put you on your guard ; forewarned is forearmed ; and I foresee that you'll be trampled on by those upsetting Rivers people. I am a woman of the middle class, and they do not think I am fit to dust their shoes ; but, mind you, the middle class is the back-bone of the nation. You hold your own, Celia, my dear ; don't let your husband shut you up in a wilderness of moors and mountains, while he goes on the rampage, giving his photograph right and left to all sorts and conditions of women, as the prayer-book says."

Celia laughed in an airy fashion, and Aunt Sarah chafed at having produced so slight an impression.

On reaching home Celia found several notes awaiting her, among them one from Lady Mary asking her to dine with them and some friends at Richmond.

A day, or rather an afternoon, away from town, its dust and noise, seemed most tempting, and Celia wrote to accept the invitation before she slept.

"It is curious," she thought while she undressed, "that I always feel happier with the Damers when Derek is away. Lady Mary *does* rather like me. She can afford to stoop from her high estate. I should find her charming, if she were not held up as an example to me."

"What shall I wear to-morrow, Francks?" she said, aloud. "I want to look very nice at this Richmond dinner."

"Well, 'm, I hardly know. Your green and white costume with the beetles' wing embroideries——"

"Oh ! that is far too flashy. I want something quiet and simple." An earnest discussion ensued, and a black grenadine

and lace garment with pale blue decorations, a dainty bonnet with blue ostrich tips, and turquoise were decided upon.

* * * * *

Fortune favoured Lady Mary with a beautiful spring day, soft and balmy, but not over warm.

The guests besides herself were Miss Wilmot, Major Harford, Dacre, a young girl cousin of Mr. Damer's, and Mr. Preston, who had promised to join them afterwards.

Celia was tired and slept profoundly. Her sense of irritation and injustice faded considerably now that the offender was absent, and she rose considerably refreshed. The second post brought her a few lines from Derek.

"Got down all right, and am just off to look at Rothwell. Fine country, rather bleak. Very strange, and by no means pleasant, to be here without you. Send me a line by half-past five post. Ever yours, devotedly,

"DEREK RIVERS."

This completed Celia's contentment. She was an ill-tempered, fanciful silly, and all would go right in future.

She therefore wrote a long, bright letter to her husband, and also replied to a pressing invitation from Mrs. Carter, inviting her to luncheon. This suggested a happy idea to Celia. She would neither offend Derek by going to her objectionable friend's house, nor wound the friend by rejecting her advances too abruptly. She would take advantage of Derek's absence and ask her to a *tête-à-tête* luncheon; then they would soon get away out of town, and the little difficulty would melt away.

She wrote accordingly; and after a quiet afternoon spent in resting, and leaving the endless tale of cards, arrived at Lady Mary Damer's punctually, looking an embodiment of youth and brightness. She was warmly welcomed; something in her frank naturalness made her generally welcome. No one found fault with her save the man she loved so well.

This arose chiefly from the exceeding pride which made him desirous that his wife should seem faultless, and an undercurrent of jealousy, of which he was almost unconscious, springing from the everlasting sense that he owed more to her than she to him. Derek Rivers was the last man that ought to have married an heiress.

"What a delightful evening!" exclaimed Celia, as they rolled swiftly towards Hammersmith with Miss Wilmot, Damer, and Dacre as her companions. "If Derek has the same, it may give too great a charm to the place he is going to look at. He says in his note, this morning, that the country seems dreary. Now, I want to live in a richly wooded, flowery Garden of Eden country."

"I fancy you might like our country," said Miss Wilmot; "people don't rave about it, but it abounds in charming 'bits,' also fine open spaces, which I think one wants as a relief after the closeness of thick woods. A continuously beautiful district loses by sameness."

"Exactly," returned Damer. "'There's a beauty forever unchangeably bright, Like the long sunny lapse of a summer's daylight,' eh!"

"My dear Mr. Damer, are you so bygone in your tastes as to quote Moore nowadays?" cried Celia. "I thought no one cared to read Moore but myself. I like him; he is so musical."

"Are you a musician, Mrs. Rivers?" asked Dacre.

"I cannot claim so lofty a title, but I love playing when I am alone."

"I hope you sing," put in Miss Wilmot. "I am choir-mistress at home, and always have designs on fresh visitors to Riversdale, with a view to anthems and extra fine hymns. I hope Captain Rivers will find something nice in the way of an abode near Riversdale."

"Oh, so do I, though it will not be for long. I quite enjoy the notion of moving about with the regiment."

"I don't fancy the sunny side of a baggage-waggon would suit you, Mrs. Rivers," said Dacre.

"I don't agree with you. Mrs. Rivers is a true alchemist: her spirit turns life to gold."

"A thousand thanks for such a lovely compliment, Mr. Damer," said Celia, smiling, yet suddenly growing grave, for the words struck her as ill-omened.

Miss Wilmot's eyes met hers as she spoke, and something kindly sympathetic, even partly compassionate, in their expression stirred a curiously mingled feeling, half grateful, half resentful, in Celia's heart.

The road after reaching Barnes Common becomes pretty and picturesque, all talked easily and pleasantly of people and things. The fresh, sweet air of the spring evening was delightful after the hot rooms to which they had all been accustomed of late, so the drive seemed accomplished with wonderful rapidity.

"Is there a moon to-night?" asked Mrs. Rivers, as they approached the "Star and Garter."

"There is, and it rises early," returned Mr. Damer.

"Then let us walk back through the park, and the carriages can wait at the Sheen gate for us."

"Well thought!" cried Dacre; "it will be heavenly."

It was a well-assorted party, and, though not brilliant, the talk was lively and intelligent, glancing at books, politics, art, and not disdaining gossip. In this, Major Harford, a well-known club man, was a proficient.

"Who has seen Sir Thomas Phipps and his new wife?" he asked, when dinner was nearly over.

"I have," cried Dacre; "met them in the park the day before yesterday. He doesn't drive that mail phaeton with the high-stepping bays any longer. He was sitting meekly beside madame in a neat victoria."

"Just so. Few men can sustain madame *and* a mail phaeton all to themselves."

"Oh, I saw her, too!" said Miss Maynard, Damer's cousin, a pretty young country girl in her first season. "We used to know Sir Thomas down at Sidmouth, when he first came back from India. I was rather afraid of him. He quarrelled a good deal with people."

"They said he made a pot of money by speculating in the Mysore gold-mines," remarked Major Harford.

"Who is Lady Phipps?" asked Miss Wilmot.

"She is the relict of an Indian military doctor. Sir Thomas knew her somewhere abroad. Then she picked him up somewhere abroad. Don't know how, for she was not in any society; lived away in a wild country north of Kensington Gardens,—Westbourne Park, the Whiteley district, where Anglo-Indians abound. She is deucedly handsome and well made up. You always met a lot of fellows home-on-leave at her little place in Alexandra Terrace, I think the place was called. It was very taking, with flowers and nicknacks,—not twopence half-pennyworth in the whole lot,—but very bright and home-like sort of thing, you know, that kept you staying on and feeling comfortable. He might have done better, though."

"Alexandra Terrace," thought Celia. "Could it be by any chance this person who left Derek's photograph behind? No, that is most unlikely. He is far too fastidious to be attracted by such a woman."

She put away the idea and joined in the discussion on the approaching Derby, adding her quota to the sweepstake started by Harford and Dacre.

The walk homeward by moonlight was, Dacre declared, the best part of the entertainment. He established himself by Celia's side, and grew quite confidential respecting his own feelings and aspirations, his ideal of women, his lofty conception of love. Celia was much interested in his picture of his own emotions. She was quite ready to act a sister's part to him.

Meanwhile, Preston, who, failing to secure Celia for his companion, had gratefully accepted Lady Mary, had somehow come round to the subject of Derek's wife, a subject which often exercised his thoughts, asked where Derek was.

"He has gone to look for a hunting- or a shooting-lodge somewhere in the north," she returned.

"I wish he could find something near the Court, Lady Mary."

"Yes, so do I. Mrs. Rivers is very attractive."

"She is, and you might be a valuable friend to her."

"I should be very glad if I could, but she is just a wee *entêtée*."

"Perhaps so. If she is obstinate in her beliefs, it is because the haze of youth dims her vision."

"Yes, I understand that; and sometimes I wish Derek were older or younger; but she is a little absurd, sometimes."

"Yet her absurdities have a degree of cleverness in them; there is wit in her nonsense; though she often does not know what she is talking about."

"You seem to understand Celia's nature wonderfully well. To me she is very attractive, though I do not think she quite likes me."

"She must like you later; but Derek is not wise."

"No," interrupted Lady Mary. "He will hold me up as a model for imitation,—a great mistake."

"All that will pass away, and she will appreciate you as you deserve."

"I hope she may, but we have some bad bits of the road to traverse yet."

Here they found Mr. Damer and Miss Wilmot awaiting them, and their confidential talk was over for the present.

CHAPTER V.

RIVERS and his cousin rather enjoyed their house-hunting expedition. Both men disliked London life for longer than a brief spell wherein to meet and dine with old friends at their clubs, and the race meetings in the neighbourhood of the metropolis. Plenty of exercise in the open air was more to their taste than going in and out of houses and shops, and during the few days they spent together they accomplished a great amount of walking, while they discussed the agricultural outlook and the aspect of local farming.

"Neither of these places will do," said Rivers, after they had minutely inspected both. "Let us go back to town to-morrow."

"By all means. To be sure, the time does not seem so long to me. I have no charming wife to go back to."

Rivers laughed.

"It does make a difference, certainly," he returned. "Why don't you start a charming one on your own account?"

"I find other men's so pleasant that I forget to secure one all to myself."

"Don't postpone things too long. Shall we start early to-morrow, and get in about luncheon time?"

"All right. I shall go on to Riversdale the day after to-morrow, where I hope you and Mrs. Rivers will soon join me. I am going to thin part of Darley woods." And Lord Riversdale ran on with his plans respecting his estate, in the management of which he took the deepest interest.

* * * * *

"You'll come on with me to luncheon?" said Derek, as he and his cousin stood together on the platform at King's Cross.

"With pleasure ; that is, if I shall not be in the way."

"In the way! Oh, pooh! nonsense."

Riversdale laughed.

"Very well. I'll come on and pay my respects to Mrs. Derek; only I must be off as soon as I have eaten."

"As soon as you like as soon as you have refreshed the inner man."

Rivers was surprised to find himself thinking they had hit on a remarkably slow horse as they drove towards C—Square.

It would be deucedly annoying if Celia had gone out before they arrived, and when alone she was disposed to dine at one o'clock. He had not given her any notice of his coming, for he had been mildly surprised, not in the least angry, that his wife had not written to him more frequently. When at last they reached the door, Rivers sprang from the hansom eagerly enough.

"Mrs. Rivers at home?" was his first question to the man who opened the door.

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Rivers is at luncheon."

"All right; come along," he called to Riversdale as he went towards the dining-room door, which was partly open, and where he paused at the sound of a strange voice, a loud, jovial voice, almost too deep and strong for a woman's.

"So I just told Mr. Carter," it was saying, "there was no use in talking such nonsense to *me*. I had made up *my* mind to have a victoria and pair; none of your one horse concerns for me. I needn't tell you I got what I wanted, though I haven't a lot of money of my own as *you* have."

"Who in Heaven's name has Celia picked up?" thought Derek, as he pushed the door wide open and entered.

The table was elaborately laid for luncheon; his wife, in a pretty morning dress, was looking well and bright; *but*, opposite to him was a large young woman in a gown of many colours, a huge growth of flowers, interspersed with feathers, surmounting her head; her mouth, never quite closed, was fully opened

in a self-satisfied laugh, showing a range of large white teeth. Rivers immediately recognised her.

For an instant he stood as if turned to stone by this appalling vision, then Celia flew to him, her eyes glowing with joy at his unexpected return.

"Oh, Derek! I had no idea you would come to-day."

"Just so," he returned, coldly. "Here's Riversdale."

"So glad to see you," said Celia, holding out her hand as he came in.

"Let me introduce you to my friend, Mrs. Barnard Carter."

Riversdale bowed, while he noticed a pained, anxious look in Celia's eyes, and the vivid flush which mounted almost to her brow.

"I am charmed to see you, Captain Rivers," exclaimed Mrs. Carter. Then to Riversdale, "Mrs. Rivers and I were great chums till I left school. Now we have both gone into another, shall I say a higher school, my lord?"

"It is hard to answer that question," returned Rivers. "Bring me some cold beef," to the butler. "I can't stand these mixtures," waiving away the mayonnaise. "What are you taking, Mrs. Carter?"

"Oh! I have some mayonnaise, and very good it is. I can't say I care for plain things."

"Nor I," put in Riversdale. "The fact is, Derek has been so pampered and petted since Mrs. Rivers took him in hand, that he will soon be thankful for a few herbs and water from the neighbouring spring for a change."

"Not quite that," returned Derek, whose well-trained self-possession was proof against even a worse trial than the presence of Mrs. Carter; yet Celia could see that he was greatly displeased. "Bring some sparkling Moselle," he continued to the servant. "I assure you, Mrs. Carter, light Bordeaux is by no means the right thing after mayonnaise."

"Isn't it? Well, I have no objection to sparkling Moselle. I remember when it was a great treat to have a bottle of

currant wine smuggled into our room at Miss Green's, eh ! Mrs. Rivers ? Law ! what fun we used to have in those days ; it makes me feel quite old to look back. Your wife was such a cheeky little soul then. Do you remember the German *fräulein*, what a duffer she was ? What tricks you used to play on her !”

“I am afraid I was very thoughtless and unkind,” returned Celia, with a slight blush. “I believe young girls have very little feeling.”

“Well, my dear, you had plenty. Why, your hand was in your pocket for everyone that asked you.”

“Mrs. Carter's carriage,” said the butler, solemnly approaching that lady. She merely nodded, and continued to run on about her school-days and escapades in what she thought was a lively and pleasing style, encouraged by Lord Riversdale's laughter. At length, Mrs. Rivers took advantage of a moment's pause in her friend's babble, and said,—

“I hope you will excuse me, dear Mrs. Carter, if I postpone the pleasure of dining with you, as Captain Rivers has returned so unexpectedly. I want to hear his account of the places he has been looking at, and——” she hesitated.

“Oh, don't apologise ! I quite understand : it does not like to leave its dear hubby just when he has returned to it.”

Lord Riversdale burst out laughing at the mock sentimental tone in which this was said, and Mrs. Carter, convinced that she was making a distinct success, followed it up.

“It is early days with you, Captain Rivers ; now, my *sposo* and myself are quite old married people. However, I must not stay any longer, for I have a hundred and one things myself to do,” rising and putting on her gloves. “You'll get Captain Rivers to fix an early day to dine with us, then he and Mr. Carter can talk politics together. You must make your husband go into Parliament, dear. It's great fun to be in the House ; good-bye.”

Rivers bowed stiffly. Lord Riversdale opened the door

and accompanied her into the hall, which emboldened her to give him her card and inform him she was at home on Sundays, whereupon he expressed his regret that he was going out of town almost immediately, and could not avail himself of her permission to call.

Silence had evidently not been broken between Rivers and his wife when his kinsman returned to the dining-room, and he interrupted the somewhat solemn pause by a hearty laugh as he threw himself into one of the large easy-chairs which stood by the fireplace.

"She is a wonderfully funny woman," he exclaimed. "There's an irrepressibleness about her that's thoroughly comic."

"Come and have a cigar in my den," said Derek, with a grim look, making a move towards the door.

"Thanks. I must resist the tempting offer. I have work to do; life is not all beer and skittles with *me*. Now, Mrs. Rivers, suppose you and Derek come down for two or three days next week, and have a little fresh air after the hot rooms and dust of town.—Your wife would be pleased with the old place, I fancy, and I could give her a nice quiet mount."

"Oh, I should like it of all things; if Derek will go," cried Celia, relieved at the idea of leaving town and its social difficulties.

"Thanks, old man; I'll see about it."

"Keep him up to his half-promise, and good-bye for the present."

Rivers accompanied his cousin to the door and did not return. Celia stood irresolute for a minute, feeling strangely uneasy.

Was ever anything so unfortunate as Derek's unexpected return on that day, of all others, when she hoped to do her bit of civility to her former school-fellow unobtrusively, once and forever.

She did not yet know that the only successful method to

break loose from the jungle of undesirable acquaintance is to use the pruning-knife with unscrupulous promptitude, and, as yet, it hurt her to seem rude to anyone who had not offended her. She felt that her husband had been greatly annoyed, and she was half afraid to follow him into the study. But she resisted the cowardly impulse; she would explain the *contretemps* and tell everything to him. She had almost as great a horror of Mrs. Barnard Carter's offensively familiar manners as Derek himself, only she remembered how roughly kind Milly had been in those early school-days, and she could not turn her back on her all at once.

Rivers had sheltered himself behind the *Sporting News*, above which a curl of blue smoke slowly rose. She was half-abashed, half-amused to find a difficulty in speaking to her own husband, so she walked across the room and put one or two books, which were lying about, in their places, then she came and leant over the back of his chair.

"Have you nothing to tell me about those houses you looked at, Derek?"

"Well, no; not much. I was looking forward with pleasure to surprising you as we travelled up this morning. I little thought you had taken advantage of my absence to enjoy a surreptitious *tête-à-tête* with that appalling woman."

"But, Derek, I didn't enjoy it; how can you suppose I could?" She came round to face him. "And how can I do anything surreptitious in my own house? If you are master, I am mistress. We both have the right to invite whom we like; and, Derek, I really asked Mrs. Carter on purpose while you were away. She pressed me very much to go to her house, and I thought it would annoy you more if I did than if I had her here. She was so very glad to see me that I could not snub her all at once."

"Yes, that's just it. You really have no social tact. You ought to be more careful."

"I suppose you felt ashamed of my friend before your

cousin, Lord Riversdale," exclaimed Celia, her temper beginning to warm up at his peremptory tone.

"Pooh! don't talk such rubbish. What in the name of all that's absurd does it matter what anyone thinks but myself? What I object to, is being obliged to sit at table with such an offensive specimen of a women as your acquaintance, who sets my teeth on edge by her every word and look and gesture. Do you think Holmes would care to have her for a guest in the housekeeper's room? I don't ask you to cut your aunt. I suppose she has some claim on your consideration, so I endure her; but this creature——"

"Thank you for your candour," cried Celia, now thoroughly roused. "I always guessed at your endurance of poor Aunt Sarah; being of her class myself, I suppose I do not perceive her enormities as you do."

"Nature has been kind to you, Celia, I must say, and given you——"

"I cannot forget old kindnesses," his wife went on, too irate to heed his attempt to hold out the olive-branch. "Milly Saunders was very good to me when I was a lonely little stranger at school."

"By Jove! you are very unlucky to be always under obligations to the most objectionable people. Do you think this general kindness is entirely due to your own attraction? that if you had been a poor little underpaid assistant teacher, you would have had such legions of benefactors?"

"Perhaps not," said Celia, with sudden composure, the colour fading from her cheek. "Perhaps, as the one thing which cannot be made too coarse, or common, or bad style for the touch of a high-bred gentleman is the gold which vulgar hands have amassed, and to which *I* may owe a greater blessing than even kind friends,—that is, an affectionate husband."

There was a sudden dead silence, and Celia could almost hear her heart beat half with passion, half with fear at her own audacity.

Then Rivers stood up and took a turn up and down the room.

"You seem to have the gift of 'words,'" he said, grimly. "But you have made a great mistake in using it on the present occasion. By heaven! If you had had millions instead of thousands, I could not have married you if I had not fancied you."

"Exactly, fancied," murmured Celia.

"I am not a sentimental, high-flown fellow, but I liked you well enough to get over accepting fortune at your hands; and now listen to me. I can forgive this insult once because you are young and ignorant; but, mark me, I am speaking deliberately, if you are ever tempted to repeat it, I will not live in your house or on your bounty an hour after the words have passed your lips. I did not think that you belonged to the same category as your Aunt Sarah's and Mrs. Carter's; I fancied nature had placed you higher."

Celia could hardly keep herself from screaming aloud for pardon and pity, but some instinct, born of pride, told her it would not do to humble herself under his feet. She stood quite still and silent for an instant, her dry, defiant eyes on his, then, with a slight bend of her head, she said, quietly, "I was wrong, and I beg your pardon for so shabby a speech, but you were harsh, and hurt me. If it seems good to you, let us pardon each other."

"Done!" said Rivers, looking at her with interest. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable; so come, kiss, and be friends; *but* remember my warning, another such speech, and we part forever."

He walked over to her, and laying his hand on her shoulder stooped to kiss her brow.

"Why, you are trembling all over. You will hurt yourself if you give way to such tempers, and you are too obstinate to show what you feel."

He drew her into his arms and held her tightly. "Come,

don't be cross ; give me a kiss ! No, no, the mouth ! a real kiss, Celia, you foolish, little child. You know I am very fond of you, and it goes against *your* grain to say no to me."

"Derek," drawing away from him, and looking into his eyes, her own darkened with an expression of pain, "Derek, you do not know what real love means."

She gently unclasped his arms and left him.

CHAPTER VI.

To Rivers this incident was an annoying evidence of ill-temper and ill-breeding in his wife, and affected him as the irritating bite of a small insect, causing very decided discomfort without calling upon his powers of self-control and endurance as a larger matter would. That she should stoop to mention her money lowered her in his estimation ; besides, it stung him more keenly than he admitted even to himself, and threw an exceedingly cold douche over his strong, though rather physical liking for her.

But to Celia it was a tragedy, a moral earthquake. She indeed felt that she had spoken unadvisedly with her lips ; she would have given years of her young life to obliterate her foolish speech. What evil spirit had prompted her ? She was quivering from head to foot with remorse, and anguish. She had wounded the man she loved with all the romantic ardour of a young and tender heart, and yet she dared not indulge its impulse to implore his forgiveness with tears and kisses ; that would only confirm him in his opinion that she was a petulant child, to be caressed and indulged, not a reasonable woman to be treated as a true comrade. She felt it would be many a day before she could live down the effect of this their first altercation ; yet it would not do to show the penitence she felt ; he would only despise her. She must assume a

friendly, composed air, and not make a mountain of a mole-hill. Ah! it was a real mountain to her; could she ever surmount its formidable height? She felt that Derek was quite capable of carrying out his threat. If he only knew she valued money chiefly because it could give pleasure. She had made her path infinitely more difficult than it need have been. But, indeed, Derek had been very harsh and unkind.

She felt bitterly that had she any sacredness in his eyes he never would have spoken to her as he did. "But have I the right to complain? He does not give me the highest kind of affection; perhaps I am incapable of inspiring it, perhaps he is incapable of giving it." How different life was becoming from what she had expected. The seriousness of the position in which she had placed herself moved her too profoundly for tears. She would need all her self-control, her courage, her observation to recover the ground she had lost; above all, she must not let herself fear her husband, as well as love him with an intensity that was at times painful. No; she must be self-respecting.

With a courage as resolute as that of the proudest Vere de Vere among her husband's high-born friends, she rose from the couch where she had thrown herself to think, and tried to steady her hand and write to Aunt Sarah, announcing Derek's arrival and excusing herself from dining with that relative. Then she ordered the carriage, and made a careful toilette.

"Has Captain Rivers gone out?" she asked the footman as she descended the stair.

"I think he is still in the study, 'm."

She paused a moment to gather courage, and then opened the door, advancing into the room with marvellous composure, considering how her heart sank within her.

Rivers was writing, with his face turned towards the door, and looked up as she came in. She was extremely pale, but her lips were slightly parted in a pleasant smile.

He, like most men, dreaded a scene, and was partly thank-

ful, partly surprised, with a slightly mortified surprise, to see her so calm and carefully attired.

"Are you going to dine at home, Derek?" she asked, as she buttoned her glove.

"At home, of course."

"Then I shall try and persuade the Damers to dine with us. I think they are disengaged."

"Yes; do by all means. I am glad you thought of it."

"Can I set you down anywhere?"

"Thanks, no. I am going to meet a man I used to know in India at the club."

"Oh! very well. Till dinner-time, then." She gave him a friendly little nod.

Her husband rose and opened the door, escorted her to her carriage with the courtesy he always showed her, and she, growing steadier every moment as she felt she had adopted the right line, blew him a kiss as she drove off.

"By Jove! she is a cooler hand than I imagined," thought Rivers, returning to finish his letter. "I always had an idea she was deucedly fond of me. She ought to have humbled herself in the dust to make it up, after insulting me as she did; and she was ready to dress and go out as if nothing had happened. I wish she were not so deeply tainted with the purse-pride of her class. There is no understanding women! They are generally plucky or cowardly at the wrong time. Celia has a spirit, undoubtedly, and she'll be a prettier woman at five or six and twenty than she is now." The subject of his letter then absorbed him, and the idea of his wife faded away.

Little more than an hour later, as Rivers sat in the reading-room of his club talking with one or two acquaintances, his wife's card was brought to him. The words, "Do come down and speak to me," were pencilled on it. He immediately obeyed, and found her waiting for him in her carriage, still looking pale, but with smiling eyes.

"Oh, Derek! Lady Mary wants *us* to dine with them.

'They have a box for 'Our Boys,' to-night, and have asked us to go. Do come. I love the theatre, and I have wanted so much to see 'Our Boys.' ''

"Yes, if you wish it. I hear it is great fun. Early dinner, of course?"

"Yes, half-past six. It is past four now. Can you take a turn with me in the park? then it will be nearly time to dress."

"I would, only I must wait for Repton, the man I was to meet. He is behind time already. Don't be afraid; I'll be at home by six sharp," and Celia drove away, hoping that all would be well, telling herself that he was fond of her in his own way.

Rivers was a little late, but dressed quickly. He found his wife ready, and they set off in fairly good temper with each other.

Lady Mary observed that Celia looked as if she had had enough of the season, on which she exclaimed, "I have, indeed. I am so glad we are going down to Riversdale next week. Perhaps Derek may find some place to suit us in that part of the country. I think a very short time in London will satisfy me in the year."

"There is good hunting all round us, and even as far as the Welsh border. There it grows hilly," said Mr. Damer. "It would be very nice to have you both in our neighbourhood."

"Very nice, indeed," echoed Lady Mary, kindly. "I hope you will come on to the Court when you leave Riversdale. I don't think I can keep away from home and the bairns longer than ten days more."

"I should like to see Damer Court again," exclaimed Rivers. "I haven't been there for six or seven years."

"It is a nice old place. I think you would like it," said Lady Mary, addressing Celia; "and I should like to introduce you to my little son and daughter."

"I shall be delighted to come."

"Damer Court is much more interesting than Riversdale," put in Rivers. "It is Tudoresque, with secret chambers, hiding-holes, a blood-stained staircase, and a ghost or two. Celia will be enchanted with it."

"Two ghosts!" she echoed. "Oh, that quite vulgarises the idea. To be imposing, a ghost must be alone in its glory."

"I suspect you will be awfully frightened after dark," said her husband.

"Come and try," added Damer.

Here the carriage was announced, and they set forth, well disposed to be amused.

The theatre was Celia's favourite pastime. Though so bright and laughter loving, she had a strong vein of romance and a vivid imagination underlying at a shallow depth her surface nature. Stage sorrows moved her to floods of tears, stage comedy to bursts of joyous laughter. Of the theatre she had had very little since her marriage. While abroad she did not understand the language well enough to enjoy the performances, and in London she had been too much engaged to find time for the drama. To-night she really meant to enjoy herself, but even across this determination the shadow of the vividly remembered scene with her husband projected itself.

Had he really forgiven her? Had she really forgiven him? for Derek *had* been rude and unreasonable; nor did she half like the condescending manner in which he had extended pardon to her. He did not seem to think for a moment that any blame attached to him.

Well, at all events, she would put away unpleasant thoughts, and show him by her gaiety and good-humour that she bore no malice, and kept up no unfriendly spirit.

It was a very full house, and the audience extremely appreciative.

No sooner were the actors on the stage, than Celia forgot everything save the scene before her. She laughed unrestrainedly, and there was the ring of real delight in her bursts of merri-

ment. Lady Mary found herself enjoying the play much more than she expected, from sympathy with Celia's girlish pleasure. Rivers, though extremely fastidious respecting the manners and bearing of his own special womankind, was not so stupid as to be displeased by her frank amusement, and smiled indulgently upon her, and answered the exclamations she addressed to him from time to time graciously enough. Indeed, he was greatly amused himself, but in his own mind he was saying, "What a child it is. Her unfortunate speech to me this morning has passed from her memory. It is folly to be seriously angry with her; only she must be taught good manners," and Rivers grimly resolved to teach them, even while he did, noticing the creamy whiteness of her skin, the pretty turn of her throat. Alas for Celia when the inevitable period arrived, when the charm of these attractive points would be lost in the fatal fog of familiarity!

"I have been looking at your box at intervals since I came in," said an old general in the stalls, to speak with whom Rivers had gone down-stairs. "There's a pretty, fresh, bright girl there who has been enjoying the play with all her heart. It's a treat to see her in these *blasé* days."

"That pretty girl is my wife," returned Rivers, smiling.

"Oh, she is? Then you are a deuced lucky fellow to hit on a girl like that, *and* a fortune! Gad, she looks as happy as if she hadn't a penny in the world."

"I almost wish she had not," mused Rivers; "only, *if* she had not, she would, probably, not be my wife. She is a happy little soul, at all events."

He returned to his party in very good-humour, and driving home he drew Celia affectionately into his arms. "And you enjoyed your evening?" he said.

"Yes, immensely!" she returned, resisting her strong inclination to volunteer a kiss and lean against his breast, while the tenderness of his touch sent a delicious thrill shivering through her frame; but she only pressed the arm

he had placed round her against her side, saying, "And you, Derek, you were not bored?"

"Not at all; though I am rather indifferent to the acting, in general."

These words brought them to their own door.

* * * * *

"And so you are going off out of reach to that out-of-the-way place in the country?" said Aunt Sarah, the evening before Celia was to start for Riversdale.

She was dining with Mrs. Twiss, Derek having gone to a man's dinner given by his friend the general.

"When am I to see you again?"

"I am not quite sure, auntie. We are to be at Riversdale for a while, and——"

"Ah!" interrupted Mrs. Twiss; "*that's* where you ought to rule as mistress, that was the home for you."

"Thank you. I much prefer making my own home with Derek. You don't suppose I could ever have fallen in love with such a commonplace person as Lord Riversdale?"

"Oh, commonplace or not, he is a jolly good fellow, and easier to live with than his high mightiness your husband."

"Well, auntie, I have been more than eight months married, and I find no difficulty in living with Derek."

"Ah! well, it's still early days; but there's no denying the captain was a very fast man."

"Never mind, he is a slow one now. I will not listen, if you talk in this way."

"Ah! well, there are none so blind as those that won't see. Tell me, have you been to see Mrs. Barnard Carter? She was here on Tuesday, and was saying she had never set eyes on you since she lunched at your house."

"I called on her to-day, and left my P. P. C. She was out."

"Are you going to cut her?"

"No, certainly not; but I shall not be intimate with her."

"Well, she is a nice, honest, straightforward creature, and we will see her husband in the Cabinet yet."

"Perhaps. I am sure I don't care. Do you know, auntie, we have some hopes of finding a nice place in the neighbourhood of Riversdale, and then you must come down and stay with us."

"I'd like that well enough. And when you do establish yourself, Celia, mind you *are* mistress of your own house. It's what every woman has a right to be, and you specially, for there ain't a thing you don't pay for yourself."

"Mrs. Rivers's carriage," announced the solemn German who was Mrs. Twiss's major-domo.

"Good-bye, my dear child. Write to me very often ; don't forget, you are the only creature that's left to me."

"Indeed I will not ! Indeed I never do !" cried Celia, embracing her aunt affectionately, but not sorry to escape her unpleasant indications of dislike to Derek.

Riversdale was in the picturesque country known as Brookshire, within sight of the Welsh hills, and far from manufacturing towns or mining centres ; an agricultural and sporting district, somewhat flat on the east, but rising abruptly into rocky heights to the west. Through it with many a bend and many a turn flowed a fairly broad stream ; it could hardly be termed a river.

This was the leading feature of Lord Riversdale's place, and a most charming one in the glow of summer.

The railway station was six or seven miles distant from the house, and the travellers found their host awaiting them with a waggonette and pair of fine horses.

"Welcome, my dear Mrs. Rivers, a thousand welcomes to our old home !" exclaimed the earl, shaking hands with her cordially. "So glad the sun has favoured you ! I was awfully afraid last night it was going to rain.—Oh, never mind the luggage, Derek ; my people will look after it ; they have a break here for your servants.—Go on, Davis," to the

coachman, and away they went at a swinging trot, their host pointing whatever was worthy of notice as they went along. Celia noticed the softened expression that stole over her husband's face as he looked round on the familiar scene with vivid interest.

In truth, he was looking back on the desperate condition in which he had found himself on his return from India little more than a year ago. There he thought he might never see the home of his forebears again. Now he was at ease, with years of peace and prosperity stretching out before him, while still young enough to make a place for himself in his own world. "I *do* owe Celia a heavy debt of gratitude," he said to himself, "and, to do her justice, she never thinks of it except when she loses her temper. Then I must check it, but I think she will never transgress again. By Jove! I'll take care of her money and of herself; she's a good, generous girl as ever lived. In time she'll gather more tact and dignity. I wish she would take more kindly to Mary Damer. I'm afraid there's a bit of jealousy rusting the hinges of their friendship." He looked with a slight but caressing smile at his wife. "The sun is in your eyes, Celia," he said. "Here's your parasol."

She accepted it with an expressive look, and Riversdale went on with what he was saying.

"You'll find it rather dull, I am afraid, Mrs. Rivers. I have no visitor but young Dacre, who is an ardent fisherman.—You used to be given to angling in bygone days, Derek,—that is, when there was nothing else to be done,—so you can punish the trout and I will try and amuse Mrs. Rivers."

Celia listened with pleased interest to the talk between her husband and Riversdale, which was chiefly reminiscent, turning on Derek's exploits and escapades when a boy, as he always spent his holidays at his uncle's place.

"Here we are!" exclaimed the host, when, after following the avenue through a park dotted with clumps of fine trees,

they drew up at the entrance. "It's a beastly, ugly edifice, but you'll find it tolerably comfortable inside."

It was both handsome and comfortable, and in Celia's eyes seemed a palace, full of beautiful things. She had never before recognised the dignity and importance of her husband's family, though she laughed at herself for feeling so gratified by the exclamation of her maid as she took off her travelling cloak and removed the dust of the journey before going down to luncheon. "Law, 'm, this *is* a fine place! I never was in so grand a house before, and Rivers's valet tells me that if my lord does not marry it will all come to the captain."

"But my lord *will* marry, you may be sure," returned her mistress. "The house may not be very beautiful, but the country is charming. What a lovely view from this window over the wide country with blue hills in the distance! Have you a comfortable room, Francks?"

"Oh, yes, 'm, thank you. It's fit for any lady and quite near, up a few steps at the end of the corridor. There's the bell, 'm."

CHAPTER VII.

RIVERS and Dacre elected to ride as soon as the first heat of the noonday was past, while the host took Celia into the library, a vast, cool apartment, amply lined with books,—the gatherings of many generations.

She was greatly delighted, and expressed her admiration with her usual warmth and enthusiasm.

"Oh, how I should like to read here for hours! I seem only getting glimpses of my own ignorance, and I was perpetually being taught for years and years!" She felt much freer to express what she felt, without stopping to think of what she was saying, with her husband's kinsman than with himself.

"It takes a good deal of teaching before one knows *how* to read, I fancy," said Riversdale.

"Yes, I understand. Then one never has time to do anything thoroughly," continued Celia, walking slowly along by the shelves and scanning the titles. "No one could ever read all these books. Of course I have seen great public libraries, but they seemed quite out of one's reach, but I never saw such a collection in a private house."

"This is by no means remarkable, I assure you. As to reading them all, no one ever did. I am by no means a great reader myself. Indeed, I fancy there's a lot of time wasted in reading. The great point is to know what to read."

"How can one find out?" asked Celia, eagerly.

"Don't ask me, Mrs. Rivers," he returned, laughing. "Ask Preston, if you ever have a chance. *Your* best plan, as you are not going in for examinations or a professorship, is to read what you fancy and enjoy it."

"I suppose you are right. I think Derek seems to know a great deal."

"He is certainly not of the studious sort, but I remember when he was a youngster. (I am nearly ten years his senior, you know.) He used to have fits of hard reading, especially on wet days; used to read deuced dry things, too, about wars and politics and finance. But the flesh generally got the better of him when the hounds were out or a big shoot on. Now, look at these old prints. I have rather a curious collection." He drew a chair for her beside a large portfolio stand, and she was soon absorbed in this new object of interest, asking many shrewd questions.

"What heaps of things there are to learn about," she said at last, with a sort of despairing sigh.

"Yes," said her host, laughing, "and unfortunately they go on accumulating till we shall be obliged to adopt ignorance as the only safeguard against the effects of such learning as doth make us mad."

Here Rivers came in.

"We are just off," he said. "As the horses seem very fresh, I don't think it will do them any harm if we go round by Trevallow."

"Not at all," said the host.

"Yes; just go away, Derek. Lord Riversdale is telling me all sorts of delightful, interesting things, and I don't want to be interrupted!" cried Celia, with childlike frankness.

"Oh! very well. I am gone," said Captain Rivers, laughing good-humouredly as he left the room.

"You have your husband in good order, Mrs. Rivers."

She shook her head. "I wish I had. You will think me very silly if I admit that I am just a little bit afraid of him! He can be very angry; that is not exactly what I am afraid of, but I cannot bear to see him vexed or put out."

"Very charming of you, I am sure, but pray don't let Derek know. Believe me, we men are a dastardly lot; if a woman does not stand up for herself, we rapidly develop into domestic tyrants."

"Oh! I can't believe that; at least Derek never would be, nor you, either. I am sure you could not be unkind to any one who loved you."

"I hope not; but no one can answer for himself."

There was a pause; then Celia said, thoughtfully, "If we are to live chiefly in the country, I shall want a library."

"Have a large subscription to Mudie's, then. They will supply all your needs."

"But they have not real old books."

"A couple of hundred pounds would set you up in all the most readable and interesting old books. I don't say in old editions; after these, modern literature will give you profit and pleasure enough."

A little more talk respecting country life and then Riversdale suggested a walk to the home farm and through the gardens.

Celia gladly assented, and a couple of hours went pleasantly by in this manner.

The pigs amused her, and the cleanliness and neatness of their dwellings astonished her. "I shall never use the word 'pigsty' to express dirt again," she said to the hen-wife, an old retainer who was quite proud of her praise. Then she had to see a crowd of hens and chickens, ducks and geese, guinea-fowl, turkeys, and a pet lamb the good woman had brought up by hand.

By the time they had reached the house again, Celia, who was unaccustomed to walking, felt considerably fatigued, and it was nearly time to dress for dinner. She therefore retired to her room to rest and think over the new life to which she had been introduced till refreshing sleep stole over her.

The day ended with pleasant dinner, to which the vicar and his daughter were asked to meet Derek and his wife.

The former seemed pleased to make Celia's acquaintance, and she found him an entirely new specimen of the genus *clerico*.

Her experience hitherto had been among the "eloquent preacher" order, for whom admiring congregations built churches and chapels,—men who collected large sums of money for missionaries and "homes," schools and societies, and many other excellent objects. These made a rich, childless widow of great importance in their estimation. Mrs. Twiss, therefore, enjoyed much consideration. She was exceedingly low church, while Celia was attracted to ritualism.

Now, the Rev. Arthur Wilmot was neither, and scarcely broad. He was a solid, sensible old school ecclesiastic, who gave a very Protestant rendering of all difficult passages in the rubric. The music in his church might have been better, but no parish priest could have been more thoroughly acquainted with the wants, the errors, the characteristics of his people.

His sermons, rarely reaching the length of twenty-five minutes, were more lay than spiritual, and generally on such subjects as "Duty to one's neighbour," "Self-respect," "Self-seeking," "Cleanliness of heart," "The debt of parents to children," "The nobility of experience," etc. He had a lordly manner and was greatly liked by both rich and poor.

To Celia he seemed a sort of ordained squire, who knew as much about horses and sport of all kind as Derek or Riversdale, for he entered with the utmost interest into all their discussions. He was keen on politics, though he never touched upon them in the pulpit. A tall, well set up man of sixty, with a "church militant air," the vicar had "coached" both Lord Riversdale and his cousin during a brief interregnum between leaving school and going—the one to college, the other to a crammer's.

"Did your husband ever tell you what a severe dominie I was?" asked Mr. Wilmot, in his fine, full, sonorous tones. He sat next to Celia and was most attentive.

"No, indeed! He has often spoken of you, but I never heard of anything except your kind help and his own idleness."

"Ah! He had a temper of his own, I assure you. He had also fits of extreme diligence. I did my best to keep him from soldiering."

"Did you want him to go into the church?"

"No, no! that was by no means his vocation; but he would have done well at the bar. He was not pliant enough for diplomacy. If he found any pranksome plenipotentiary telling him lies, he would probably have thrashed him and let their respective countries fight it out."

"That would never do. But, Mr. Wilmot, Derek has not a bad temper."

"Quite right to say so, my dear madam. No; he has a capital temper as long as you give him his head. At any rate,

you will never see anything but his sunny side, I am quite sure," and he gave a kindly glance at the girlish face smiling up at him.

"Are you telling tales out of school, vicar?" asked Derek, from the other side of the table. "Don't mind him, Celia. He helped to spoil me himself. Life in the army put all that to rights, though nothing like the constant give and take among a community of men for rubbing down one's angles and putting one's crooked corners straight."

"I am so glad the Damers are coming back," said Miss Wilmot. "I had a letter from Lady Mary this morning. They have been away much longer than usual. Mr. Damer can rarely stand London for more than a month."

"I find him wonderfully improved," said Rivers.

"Yes, he is. Isn't Lady Mary quite delightful?"

"Very delightful," returned Celia.

"We disgraced ourselves to-day," resumed Rivers, "by drinking beer at the Black Bull and gossiping with 'mine host.' He tells me the Grange is vacant. People only left yesterday."

"Indeed! I believe the eldest boy is in bad health. They have taken him abroad; really, I fancy the Arnolds are a little dipped."

"I think it is a place that might suit," said the vicar. "We might ride over and look at it. You ride, of course, Mrs. Rivers?"

"I have ridden, but I fear I should be a mere encumbrance to a riding-party."

"Never say such a thing. Trust yourself to me. I'll see you through safe and sound."

"You may trust the vicar!" cried Riversdale. "He is not only A 1 as to the cure of souls, but he is first-rate in the pig-skin."

This sally, which was Greek to Celia, elicited a laugh.

"Well, if you will take me with all my imperfections, I

will gladly go ; only I think Derek is the only one who ought to be with me, as he took me for better, for worse."

"I shall not shrink from the onerous responsibility," returned Rivers, with a kindly glance at his wife.

"I'll see if we have a nice lady's horse in the stables. I have not been honoured by a visit from any fair equestrian lately, but I think there is something."

"Yes, Mrs. Rivers, we'll take care you have a mount to-morrow. I'll tie a horse-cloth round me and exercise some sober steed in the morning."

"If you will deign to ride my very quiet little mare, I am sure you would find her very satisfactory," said Miss Wilmot. "Her paces are as easy as her temper."

"That sounds delightful!" cried Celia; "but what will *you* do?"

"Oh! Miss Wilmot can back every horse in my stable, and is most welcome to any one of them," said Lord Riversdale.

Here the ladies retired, and were soon deep in a talk about country occupations and amusements.

Miss Wilmot was very different from Celia's preconceived idea of a clergyman's daughter. She was a well-dressed, well-bred woman of the world, who had always mixed in the best society, had read and travelled, and been mistress of her father's house since she was nineteen. She was a most agreeable companion, and Celia gathered from her that she had a younger sister married in India, and a brother in command of a native regiment in the same country.

Then they found a common ground in music, of which both were more than ordinarily fond. Miss Wilmot had a fine and very well-trained contralto voice, and Celia played with taste and skill, so the evening ended with more than a little music, Celia proving a good accompanist. Then with a promise to call early at the rectory and look at the church, Celia bid her new friend good-night.

Half an hour later, Rivers came into his wife's dressing-

room and found her reading by an open window. How young and fair she looked !

“What are you studying?” he asked, taking up her book.

“‘Bracebridge Hall.’ That is a very old story.”

“It is quite charming, so quaint and simple.”

“You seem to be enjoying yourself, little woman, and you have quite appropriated Riversdale. Do you intend to flirt with him continuously in this fashion?”

“Yes, certainly. Lord Riversdale is a dear. I shall flirt with him all day long.”

“What an avowal ! Suppose I object, you unprincipled coquette?”

“Ah ! Derek. You are happier here than in London. So am I.”

* * * * *

The last day of their visit to Riversdale was spent in an expedition to view the place recommended to their notice.

The day before it had rained heavily, so the roads were free from dust and in excellent order. Miss Wilmot's mare was a gentle, well-bred creature, who had reached years of discretion, and Celia felt her courage rise when she looked at it. “You are uncommonly smart,” said Rivers, looking critically at his wife as they met at the top of the staircase prepared to mount. “That habit is well built. Busbine, eh !”

“No ; Wolmerhausen. Derek, if it does not seem silly, and doesn't bore you, would you mind staying beside me ? I don't feel quite safe with anyone else.”

“How can you ask me to do anything so supremely disagreeable !” said Rivers, laughing, as he gave a quick look round to make sure they were alone before he drew his wife to him and kissed her soft lips. “I'll look after you, dear,” he said.

“And you'll give me a hint if I am not sitting straight ?” said Celia. “They are waiting for us,” she added, and ran down-stairs, Rivers following her more deliberately.

Miss Wilmot was already mounted. Lord Riversdale had just put her up, and young Dacre was watching eagerly to perform a similar service for Mrs. Rivers. Celia hesitated, tried to catch her husband's eye, but he was speaking to Miss Wilmot; she therefore accepted Dacre's help and was in the saddle when Derek turned to attend to her. Miss Wilmot explained that her father had been called away to a sick parishioner at some distance, so was obliged to forego the pleasure of joining them. Then they rode off, Celia feeling quite comfortable, so easy and steady was the pace of her steed. Rivers took his place beside her with a distinct air of proprietorship. Reggie Dacre took his at the other, while Lord Riversdale and Miss Wilmot rode on in front.

The hours which ensued were some of the happiest Celia ever spent. Her doubts and fears as to Derek's love and approbation being for the moment entirely at rest. Indeed, her happiness was so complete that she was unusually silent, only answering Dacre's good-humoured chatter by monosyllables, and revelling in the consciousness of being her husband's sole care.

The road led gently upward through a fine country richly wooded; here and there came clear spaces from which they gained delightful views of the plain below dotted with villages and grey church towers. The afternoon was too hot to ride rapidly, save where they came upon an open space of common, where they indulged in a canter or a sharp trot. The horse Rivers rode was a splendid hunter and rather eager, but he soon felt the masterly hand of his rider, so Celia was but little disturbed by his pranks.

At length they reached the entrance of the Grange as the sun began to sink behind the western heights. The gate was a wide, low wooden structure, and beside it was a rustic lodge, covered with clematis and roses; the avenue wound through clumps of trees and across some pasture-land where cattle were grazing. Celia looked all round with the eye of an owner already.

"Isn't it a pretty place!" she exclaimed to Riversdale, who had taken Dacre's place.

"Yes, it's very taking. The house is pretty, too, and old,—older than the Court. It was a moated grange, but the moat is turned into a flower-garden now; things thrive wonderfully there, it is so sheltered."

A turn in the drive brought them in view of the house as he spoke.

"Ah, how charming!" cried Celia. "Look, Derek!"

"Nice old place. I know it well," he returned. It was a low, rambling, irregular building surrounded by a deep hollow, now gay with summer blossoms and full of delicate ferns, the old walls of the moat next the house, and a sloping bank at the other side. They crossed the bridge which spanned the moat to a space covered with velvet-like, greenest grass, which intervened between the moat and the house, where a few fine shrubs broke the flat surface, and dismounted at a wide door-way sheltered by a deep porch.

The door was opened by an elderly woman, evidently the housekeeper, while a couple of men came round the end of the house to assist the grooms in taking the horses round to the stables.

Then began the delightful task of examining the house. Most of the rooms were low, some large, the greater number small, all well and suitably furnished. The stairs, low and wide, each step a solid block of oak, led to a number of small rooms on the upper story, while several of the best bed-chambers were on the entrance floor at the back. There were huge out-houses and granaries, and all possible convenience for storing the fruits of the earth.

Celia was enchanted. "It is a delicious house! Do take it at once, Derek; at any rate for a year! If it has any faults (which I don't believe it has) that will give time enough to find them out. I could make the drawing-room quite lovely, and it would be so nice to be near Riversdale."

“Thanks!” exclaimed the earl. “I am quite overpowered.”

“Oh, I did not mean to call *you* Riversdale so familiarly! I meant your house; but I like to be near *you* as well.”

“How delightful to have so appreciative a cousin-in-law! Mind, I shall never forgive you if you ever tack ‘lord’ before my name again.”

“If you two have arranged your future plans, I should like to see the stables,” said Rivers, smiling.

“Oh, yes, come along!” cried Celia.

These were the most satisfactory part of the premises, being quite modern, with all the newest improvements. Then the housekeeper offered them tea in a funny little wainscoted corner room, from which a secret stair led to a passage above, which added fresh fuel to Celia’s eagerness to possess so desirable an abode, and after Miss Wilmot had had a conversation respecting the health of the heir to this picturesque place the horses were brought round, and they started on their homeward way.

CHAPTER VIII.

CELIA was quite sorry to leave Riversdale for Damer Court. In truth, she was keenly alive to the fact that she had succeeded with the men, and she feared that beside Lady Mary she would show to less advantage, yet it was not a low, mean jealousy which disturbed her. She was genuinely convinced of Lady Mary’s superiority, only it hurt her to see with what tender respect Derek treated his kinswoman, while at best his affection for herself was more the indulgence of an elder for a pretty amusing child. “I must watch Lady Mary and try to catch something of her charm; only it must not be a copy—only an adaptation.”

"I shall feel awfully desolate when you are gone," said the earl, as they drove under the gate-way which admitted to the Damer domain. "Reggie Dacre deserts me next week, too. Can't you make Derek come back after your visit to the Court?"

"I should like it of all things, but you will probably be going away yourself."

"I certainly shall, if I am left to my own devices. Look, Mrs. Rivers, there is the house!"

Celia looked, and saw a red brick mansion with projecting windows, a high, steep roof, and tall, twisted chimneys partially wreathed in ivy. The lower windows opened on a stately terrace, from which steps descended to a stiff garden. The entrance was at the west end of the mansion, the side of which overlooked the park. Celia thought it was rather too much shut in with trees; still, it was beautiful and dignified.

Lady Mary was on the terrace with her two children,—a boy and a girl about seven and four. She hastened to receive them as they drove up with the gentle cordiality which was one of her great charms, bestowing a kindly kiss of welcome on Celia. "Here are my pets," she said, presenting her children. "They begged to stay up and see their new cousin. Indeed, Derek is new to them also, he has been so long away. This is Maud, and here is my naughty John, or, more generally, Jack."

"I have not been naughty to-day, mother!" put in the young gentleman.

"No, dear. It was cruel to introduce you by such a term."

They were pale for country children, with dark eyes, and more interesting than handsome; but to Celia they seemed to give a peculiar grace and character to the scene. She had never lived in a house with children, and indeed knew very little about them, but her heart naturally went out to these young creatures. They bestowed all their attention and caresses on "Uncle Riversdale," though they stole observant

glances at Celia and "Cousin Derek." Here Mr. Damer joined them, and they dispersed to their respective rooms, Mrs. Rivers under the guidance of her hostess.

The house was not grand, but picturesque and noble. It might have been the home of one of those delightful sixteenth century poets who wrote such sweet sonnets to their somewhat numerous mistresses and apostrophised the nymphs and naiads of the neighbouring woods and waters.

Celia's room looked down into the green depths of the woods at the south side of the mansion, and had a grand carved oak bedstead and wardrobe, while a boudoir rather than a dressing-room, opening from it, had all the comforts and appliances for writing and reading.

"This house and Riversdale are revelations to me," exclaimed Celia, looking round with admiration. "I have seen plenty of dwellings which cost heaps of money, and grand palaces abroad, but they never gave me the idea of stately *homes* as these old English houses do, where everything has been used and scrupulously preserved for ages. I think, if I belonged to one of your high-class families with the home of my forefathers to live in, I should be afraid to disgrace them by the most trivial misconduct or disloyalty."

Lady Mary smiled. "I am afraid these stately homes of England do not always produce so excellent an effect upon their owners. Human nature is very much alike in all ranks. I think there ought to be something constraining in the consciousness that you have made yourself and reached from nothingness to honour,—some obligation to be just and generous and self-respecting."

"Yes, that's true. But that sort of success seems to make men overbearing and purse-proud, at any rate," continued Celia, taking off her hat. "Self-made people generally are, or get the credit of it. I am quite sure Derek thinks I am proud and fond of money; and, indeed, indeed, Lady Mary, I am not! I am very thankful to be well off; but how can I

be proud of what is mine by the accident of inheritance and not of my own earning?"

"I feel convinced, dear Celia, you have not a tinge of purse-pride," returned Lady Mary, with quiet earnestness. "You must not mind Derek. Few men can understand a woman, and if he has any fixed idea about you it will take years to dislodge it."

"Well, I understand him," cried Celia.

"Are you quite sure? Marriage brings endless revelations. Do not fret yourself. Have faith in your own rectitude and generosity. Time will show you both the truth about each other."

"But I hate to wait, and any one could see through me with half an eye."

"The eye of a friend, perhaps, not of a lover and husband."

"Oh! there is the dressing-bell, and I would much rather talk to you than dress," exclaimed Celia.

"We shall have many other opportunities, I hope," said Lady Mary, smiling kindly, as the lady's maid came in to assist her mistress.

"I wonder why I spoke so confidentially to her?" Celia asked herself. "I do like her when we are alone together. She is quite different from any one I ever met before, but when I see her with Derek I do *not* like her. He is always so deferential, even when most familiar. He thinks her worth dozens of such as I am, but I am not so sure. I really believe there is a great deal of good in me, but I can't manage to show it, and I know I never appear to advantage when I am with Lady Mary. I was all right at Riversdale. I wish I had not come here!" These reflections brought her to the end of her toilette, and she looked earnestly in the glass.

The image she saw there did not satisfy her. "I don't think this dress becomes me, Francks!" she said.

"Well, 'm, a lady of your complexion always looks well in green."

"Yes, perhaps. But this is too dark, too strong a green. It ought to have black lace over it. This white makes it look common. However, it cannot be helped now. I must hurry down. Captain Rivers is so terribly punctual."

She was the last to enter the drawing-room, but Derek was deep in conversation with Mr. Damer, and gave her a slight nod and smile as she passed him to the sofa, where Lady Mary was sitting. Her dress could not be so bad then, and with revived spirits she addressed herself to make friends with the children, and so far succeeded that the boy volunteered to show her his pony next morning, and little Maud invited her to inspect her new pet Cashmere kid, which her father had brought her from London.

They also made her give an account of herself. Had she brothers and sisters? What! not one? Where did she live? Nowhere? Hadn't she a garden, nor a fowl yard? They evidently thought her terribly destitute. Wouldn't Cousin Derek buy her a house *and* a garden? Here dinner was announced, and they were sent to bed.

At dinner Celia's troubles began. Rivers told Lady Mary of their visit to the Grange and his inclination to take it at all events for six months. This started his wife. She was so full of the charm of country life in a real old house; so eager to convey her impressions of everything that pleased or displeased her, that she monopolised the conversation and quite forgot to modulate her voice. She ran on with great glee about the views on all sides, the number of rooms, the furniture, the probable dates of the old oak chests and chairs, most of which were wrong, and particularly indulged the company with a sketch of her own intentions to buy this and build that, the only saving clause being an exclamation that she did hope Derek would take it and not hold out about rent or anything. This was suggested by a sudden glance at his look of rather grim gravity.

After dinner, Lady Mary proposed a stroll on the terrace to

look at the moonlight silvering the park and casting deep shadows of the trees over the thick, green sward. Celia was very silent. She wished she had not been so carried away by her anticipations and eager fancy, but she could not recall her too abundant speech. After all, she had done no harm, and why should she let her dread of Derek's disapprobation spoil everything? She would *not* be a slave, even to the husband she loved so passionately.

The men lingered long over their claret and conversation, while Lady Mary found it a little irksome to entertain a guest whose thoughts were evidently far away. At length she mentioned the library at Riversdale, and gradually Celia began to take an interest in the conversation, and grew anxious to examine the collection of books at the Court, which was, Lady Mary said, much smaller, but possessed many more black letter volumes, and a good many curious letters from remarkable people, as far back as Henry the Eighth's time, when a lucky ancestor amassed a goodly fortune from the plunder of the monasteries; for the process of purifying the country from Romish error made the hands of the purifiers uncommonly dirty.

"What a magic effect moonlight has on even a commonplace scene!" exclaimed Dacre, coming up behind the ladies as they leant against the balustrade of the terrace. "Here it is especially beautiful."

"I suppose the nights in the south of Europe are very fine," said Lady Mary, who had travelled but little, and she fell into conversation with Dacre, while Lord Riversdale addressed Celia.

"Do you know the dew is falling heavily? You had better come in."

"Oh, I rarely take cold. Lady Mary is much more likely to do so."

"Perhaps; but she has a wrap." So Celia turned and went indoors with him. As soon as they reached the shelter of the

house, Celia paused, and leaning on the back of a high chair said, rather solemnly, her big brown eyes raised to his, "I want to consult you about something, Lord Riversdale, and it is a great secret."

"Wild horses would not tear it from me," said the earl, laying his hand where the heart is supposed to be.

"Pray, be serious," she returned, smiling.

"She is an uncommonly pretty woman," thought her interlocutor. "Speak, then."

"I want to know how much a really first-rate hunter would cost, beautiful to look at, and strong and swift and gentle and spirited, and everything a horse ought to be?"

"What! Are you going to take the field next season, Mrs. Rivers?"

"Me!" she cried. "No; I have a little too much sense for that. But, tell me, what would such an animal cost?"

"I fancy you would have to pay a hundred and fifty guineas for such a horse."

"Ah, that is about the price of a good piano. I fancied it would be more."

"You see a piano does not eat."

"No, but a cheap horse would. Now for the secret. Derek has a birthday early in August, and I want to give him a nice present. He does not care for rings or studs or pins; he scarcely wears those he has; so it struck me he would like a horse."

"An excellent idea."

"Then, dear lord—no, dear Riversdale—will you do me a favour? Will you sell me that dark chestnut Derek seemed so pleased with the day we rode to Thorpdale Grange? that is, if you don't want it *very* much. If it is an especially fine horse, I would not mind giving more for——"

"My dear girl, don't tempt a fellow!" interrupted Riversdale. "Yes, of course, you shall have Cedric; but I shall not let you pay a hundred and fifty for him. First, we must make

sure that Derek really likes the horse ; if he does, you shall have him for one hundred and thirty.

“ I don’t want you to ask me less than anyone else. Will *you* find out if Derek really thinks the horse perfect ? ”

“ I will. But you must remember every one could not ride him, which a little depreciates his value in a commercial sense. ”

“ Do you mean to say that he is wicked and unmanageable ? Why, he might kill Derek. ”

“ It is not easy to unseat your husband. The horse has rather a queer temper, but is a lamb to some people. I noticed that he went very quietly with Derek on more than one occasion. Leave it to me ; I’ll find out everything. ”

“ You see, I want it kept a *great* secret, and have the horse brought up at breakfast-time on the 2d of August, that’s his birthday (not the horse’s, you know, but Derek’s), with a letter from me. I’ll try and write in rhyme, and then Derek will be so pleased. ”

“ He ought to be, ” said the earl, emphatically.

“ But if this one won’t do, ” continued Celia, “ would you be so very, *very* good as to look for another ? You know all about horses, so Derek says. ”

“ I shall be delighted to do anything for you ! ” exclaimed Riversdale, warmly. “ My kinsman is a deuced lucky fellow to have such a sweet little wife ! ”

Celia looked down and drew a long breath. “ I hope we shall be settled at the Grange by that time. Do you think Derek *will* take it ? ”

“ Yes, of course he will, if you like it. ”

“ I am not so sure, ” shaking her head. “ Where is he ? ”

“ Oh, he and Damer have gone to the billiard-room. Come along, Celia. You see I set you a good example of familiarity ; will you allow it ? ”

“ Oh, yes, I like it from you, ” and she held out her hand frankly. Riversdale took and held it kindly.

"All right! then come along; we'll go watch the game. I'll give you a lesson in billiard playing, if you like; it's interesting and good exercise."

"I should like to learn. I dislike games generally, that is, cards and chess. It makes me ill to see a chess-board, but tennis and things you can run or walk about in are different."

"I am sure you will like billiards."

"I will try to learn. Then I could play with Derek, you know. He is dreadfully fond of chess, and attempted to teach me, but it was no use. I should only have annoyed him and worried myself, so I gave it up, but I may manage billiards."

They were walking towards the billiard-room as they spoke, and these words brought them to the door.

Rivers and his host were deeply engaged in a match. Riversdale and Celia sat down to watch it, the former explaining the game in a low voice to her. She was pleased to look on, admiring her husband's skill, and drank in her informant's comments with avidity.

When the game ended, which it did in a victory for Rivers, his cousin announced that he was going to undertake Celia's education in billiard playing, and forthwith handed her a cue.

Mr. Damer looked on for awhile, occasionally offering suggestions, but Derek walked away at once. Celia's eyes wandered after him, with a slight look of disappointment. "That is punishment for my chattering so much at dinner," she thought; "shall I tell him I know it is, and promise never to do it again? No, I had better let it alone, and try to think before I speak another time. He is really rather unkind. I am sure, if he talked his head off, I should not mind. I like to listen." Her thoughts being thus drawn away from her game, she failed rather stupidly in carrying out Riversdale's directions.

"Ah, Mr. Damer, you must leave me to my tutor. It makes me nervous to have an onlooker!" she exclaimed.

"Quite right. I can only give strictly private lessons."

"Then I am gone," said Mr. Damer, good-humouredly. "But I shall go and tell Derek how I have been turned out," and he left them.

* * * * *

The next morning was grey and cloudy, but directly after breakfast Celia gave herself up to the children, who had evidently adopted her as a suitable companion, and went off joyously to inspect their pets and garden until Lady Mary, who attended herself to the details of her establishment assisted by a venerable housekeeper, was free to bestow her company on her guest.

The men, with the exception of Mr. Damer, who was obliged to preside on the bench at the neighbouring town, started to fish at some distance ; so the ladies passed a tranquil but pleasant morning, examining the antiquities collected by Mr. Damer, looking at the family pictures, and loitering in the library, where the illuminated missals excited Celia's warm admiration.

The afternoon proved showery ; still, with rain-cloaks and a large umbrella held over them by the attendant groom, Lady Mary and her guest ventured to take a long drive, and the former left cards at a neighbouring house. Lord Riversdale and Dacre did not return, and the evening passed tranquilly. Derek and his host played a toughly-disputed game of chess, and Lady Mary, who always had a piece of work on hand, plied her needle, while Celia read aloud a report of the last sale at Christie's which had great interest for her, as it was of old French furniture and china, the prices of which seemed to her extremely moderate, and she constantly broke off to express her regret at not being present to bid for many of them.

"These are just the things to buy for the Grange. It must be so nice to arrange one's own house," she exclaimed. "I do hope that man Derek wrote to will soon let us know if we can have the place."

"I should think he would be glad to get such tenants."

The conversation turned on houses and housekeeping until the gentlemen joined them, Mr. Damer being the victor on this occasion.

CHAPTER IX.

WHEELS greased with golden salve roll swiftly, and the preliminaries of their six months' tenancy of the Grange were soon settled. Then came a brief ecstatic period of shopping. Even Aunt Sarah was out of town, so there was nothing to interfere with Celia's delightful occupation, and she was indefatigable.

Bric-à-brac shops and silver-smiths' antique furniture stores, and even pawnbrokers' establishments, yielded up their treasures to her eager research. Christie and Manson had another sale, but only of old jewelry and books. However, Celia managed to secure some rare specimens of both.

At last she was fairly satisfied. A highly-recommended housekeeper was secured, who in her turn found servants, and before the important 2d of August dawned Derek Rivers was duly installed in what he never forgot was his wife's house, though he acknowledged that his lines had fallen in pleasant places.

Never in the long hereafter could Celia forget the delight of that first home feeling of being under her own roof, for she had fully made up her mind to buy the place. Derek, too, was busily engaged in organising the stables and buying horses to put in them. What fun it was to entertain Riversdale and the Damers, and how eagerly the "county" came to call!

All was sunshine, and the possibility of a shadow darkening the bright blue of her skies never suggested itself to Celia.

"I think, Derek, I must ask Aunt Sarah to stay with us for a week," she said, as they sat at breakfast one morning. "I have a letter from her this morning, in which she wonders if she is ever to see me again."

"Very well. Ask her by all means; it is rather a good time. I shall be going for a few days' grouse shooting with Riversdale to a moor he has just over the Welsh border, and she will keep you company."

"You will not go immediately she comes, dear?" said Celia, a little anxiously.

"No. My engagement to Riversdale is quite a week off, so I shall be able to play the amiable host. Write to Mrs. Twiss at once and ask her to come down soon. By Jove! what a rummage she'll have through the premises!"

"Yes; she will enjoy it immensely. She is fond of houses and furniture and all that sort of things. I am beginning to like them myself much more than I did."

"Yes, you are getting on. It is very lucky you have Mary so near. She is a great help. That housekeeper, Mrs. Rouse, she found for us, seems a capital woman. You could never manage without her."

"It would certainly be very tiresome; but I think I could manage my own housekeeping."

"My dear child, it would kill you in a year! Why, you would never have an hour free to come out with *me*!"

"Then I shall certainly never attempt it," returned Celia, with a radiant smile.

"Well, write your letter in good time," said Derek, rising. "I'll be in to luncheon. Will you come with me to try those ponies in your phaeton? I want to go into Berkhampton. I think Lascelles of ours is staying with the Seventh, and I should like to call on him."

"Yes, do, Derek, and make him come to dinner to-morrow. It would be so nice to have one of your brother officers with us on your birthday."

"My birthday! Ay, so it is! Gad! I am growing an old fellow,—thirty-one! I'm not young enough for you, my darling."

"I would not have you an hour younger!" cried Celia, with fervour. "I have made a little party for you,—the Damers, Riversdale, the vicar, and Miss Wilmot,—so try and get this friend of yours."

"We will see," said Rivers, and he left the room.

"How nice he is when he is in a good temper," thought Celia, as she rang for the housekeeper to attend her in her own sanctum, for Celia loved to learn the working of her establishment.

To a certain class of minds the horror of disorder is instinctive. It is not that they want to save, or that they have even a tinge of the "skinflint" nature. But wastefulness to them is so inharmonious, the adjustment of means to end such an absolute necessity, that any derangement of this equilibrium is productive of the keenest annoyance.

This mental tendency was Celia's, and to a man of her husband's class and habits it was difficult to understand that there was not a touch of niggardliness or selfishness in her prudence. Indeed, she could be lavishly generous. In this Derek resembled her. It pleased and soothed him to give. Unfortunately, he was not generous enough to accept. That he—a strong man, a well-born English gentleman—should accept favours from a girl,—the heiress of a self-made father, a man of yesterday—was intolerable. Yet he had put himself into this position by his infernal folly and reckless gambling, so he had no right to complain. But Celia ought to be careful how she dealt with him, and not obtrude her riches too offensively on his notice.

This was incomprehensible to his wife, who considered everything as much his as her own, and valued her fortune chiefly because it could minister to his pleasure and advancement. It was hard for her to comprehend how any gift of

hers—any talk about what she wished to buy or to arrange—could offend ; she therefore often offended.

They were again at breakfast the morning of Derek's birthday, and he was as usual deep in the paper. Celia was a little restless, looking often towards the door as if expecting some one to enter.

"I see that matters do not look very quiet up at ——," said Derek, putting down his paper to take his tea from his wife. "Those Hill tribes are troublesome customers. It is folly on our part to dally and palaver with them. A short, sharp, and decisive line of treatment is the only way to manage them."

"But, Derek," his wife was beginning, when the door opened and Derek's valet entered with a note for his master. "If you please, sir, Lord Riversdale's head groom has just brought this and the horse."

"Horse!" in a tone of surprise. "What horse?"

"The chestnut, sir. They call him Cedric, I think."

Derek opened the envelope hastily and read, "Accept the accompanying birthday gift. With loving, good wishes from your own—CELIA."

For one instant Rivers looked round with a bewildered expression, as if seeking for something. Then he said, "That will do. I will come out to the stables directly." The servant retired. Celia had watched her husband's face eagerly, the possibility of his not being quite pleased suggesting itself to her for the first time. Then he stood up, exclaiming, "Celia, what does this mean?"

"Only a little present for you, dear. I know you don't care for rings or anything of that sort, so I fancy myself rather clever to have thought of a nice hunter. I do hope you are pleased, Derek."

His face did not light up, as she expected it would ; but he did smile, and, drawing her to him, he kissed her brow. "Why, Celia, you must have paid a long price for that animal.

He is a splendid creature. But I will not have you lavishing your money on *me*. I cost you enough as it is; still, it was the best present you could give me, and you are a dear, generous, little soul! But you must never spend such a lot again without consulting me—unless, indeed, it is on yourself. There you are in your rights.”

“Yes, Derek! I always will. I always do consult you,”—she stood on tiptoe to put her arms round his neck,—“*except* about a present to my own fanciful, crotchety husband. About that I shall do as I like. Don’t fancy it was so costly. I made a delightful bargain with Riversdale. Now make haste, finish your breakfast, and come and look at Cedric. I do hope he will turn out gentle. *I* am dreadfully afraid of him.”

“He has a curious temper, but not a bad one. He will soon know me. Take some sugar with you and give him some. You must make his acquaintance, too!”

Life seemed altogether too lovely to Celia that morning. Derek was graciously pleased to accept her gift, and to say it was the best she could have chosen. How she enjoyed going to the stables with him! She even overcame her dread of the formidable Cedric sufficiently to offer him sugar on her little, outstretched palm, and the grand chestnut took it gently enough, and then unmistakably asked for more, which she gladly supplied. Finally, the groom was munificently tipped, and departed to publish his opinion that Captain Rivers and his “missis” were a pair of real “gentry,” and wasn’t she just dotingly fond of him!

It was a very happy, peaceful day, and the birthday dinner was most successful, Derek’s ex-comrade, Lascelles, proving so agreeable an addition to the family gathering that Celia invited him on the spot to spend a few days at the Grange before he left the neighbourhood.

“What extraordinary luck Derek Rivers has!” exclaimed Damer to his wife as they rolled homeward that evening. “It is not only that he is freed from debt and difficulty, but he

has found a capital wife. She may be a diamond slightly in the rough at present, but she will soon polish up to a high condition of brilliancy. There is plenty in her. She is pretty, too, or rather taking, and so fond of him. I protest she seemed quite grateful because Rivers deigned to be pleased with her splendid gift. You know that cousin of yours has a twist in his nature."

"He is a good fellow, for all that, George; but somehow I am afraid he is not exactly in love with her as she deserves. I can't quite explain myself, but, though he is fond of her in a way, he treats her like a child. He has no romantic feeling for her. He does not idealise her. He accepts the affection she lavishes on him; and I am sure he will always be a good husband to her in the ordinary sense of the word; but she is really of no importance in his life, and she begins to perceive it. He ought to have married an older woman,—one who knew his world as well as he does himself. She could have met him on equal terms. There is no doubt that he was driven by necessity to marry Celia, and that he was thankful to find a certain degree of attraction in her youth and pretty, soft ways that gave warmth and reality to his love-making, *but* I do not think Derek was ever really in love in his life. If he does ever take the disorder, it will be a bad case."

"He'll never fall into that sort of love with his wife," said Damer.

"No, I am afraid not; so let us pray he may never meet any one to call it forth. They will ultimately, I trust, become necessary to each other from habit, but I fear that many a heartache lies before Celia," ended Lady Mary, with a sigh. "She will yet develop into a very charming woman, and all I trust is that they may not drift into polite indifference. I am quite sure *her* patience and forbearance have a limit."

* * * * *

A day or two after Lady Mary called at the Grange by arrangement to carry off Rivers and Celia, as Mr. Damer in-

tended to shoot a certain stretch of hillside, where a heavy bag was expected, and Rivers preferred to stay at the Court in order to start early next morning. Damer, his wife, and both children had been on a shopping expedition to Berkhampton, the county town, and their way back led by the Grange. They therefore took their guests into the large waggonette, which was generally used for such expeditions. Rivers took the reins and they bowled merrily on towards the Court.

Suddenly their conversation was interrupted by another waggonette coming sharply round a sudden turn in the road and nearly running into them. There was a cloud of dust and a clatter of hoofs as the respective drivers pulled up, then exclamations of recognition.

Two ladies and three men occupied the carriage. Of the former, one was white-haired and grandmotherly, the other young ; though not in her first youth, she had lustrous dark eyes and a brilliant colour. She wore a smart, grey tailor-made dress, and a grey hat with red wings surmounted the thick coils of her dark brown hair.

Two of the men were elderly,—one hale and rosy-cheeked, the other yellow and cadaverous. The younger might be thirty or more,—slight, dandified, and good-looking in a girlish fashion. These proved to be near neighbours of Lady Mary's,—their only son, and a couple of guests, who were introduced as "Sir Thomas and Lady Phipps."

Rivers sprang down to speak to Mr. and Mrs. Wynder, who were old acquaintances. Then, somewhat to Celia's surprise, a very cordial greeting took place between him and Lady Phipps, who presented him to her husband, while Mrs. Wynder explained to Celia that they were returning from Damer Court, where they had been to call, and expressed her pleasure at making the acquaintance of their friend Derek's wife. Finally, the whole party were invited to luncheon on the following Thursday, and, good-byes having been exchanged, they drove away in different directions.

"I was surprised to see you and that lady—Lady Phipps—seem so glad to meet," said Mrs. Rivers to her husband when they had driven a few yards.

"Were you? Why? When one has knocked about the world a bit, acquaintances are apt to turn up in every direction. What has brought her down here, I wonder?"

"Mrs. Wynder told me that Sir Thomas Phipps and her husband are very old friends,—indeed, they were at school together," said Lady Mary, "He has lately married, and they are staying at the 'Beeches' (Mr. Wynder's place)."

"I used to meet Mrs.—I mean Lady Phipps in India," said Derek; "and then when I came back I found her a widow and established in London. She is very handsome and wonderfully preserved."

"Yes, she is very handsome, but somehow I do not admire her," observed Celia.

"Few women do," said Rivers, drily.

"I do not fancy the Wynders like their friend's marriage," put in Mr. Damer. "Her new ladyship is very lively and sociable and given to gadding about, whereas most of *his* friends think he wanted a nurse." At this Derek burst into a fit of laughter.

"I don't think he has selected the right article," he said.

"I am told Lady Phipps was the widow of a military doctor; so, perhaps, she has had some training," remarked Lady Mary.

"By Jove! I don't imagine she allowed her particular sawbones much opportunity to instruct her," exclaimed Rivers. "But she is a remarkably fine woman. She was immensely admired in India."

"A fine woman is a horrid phrase," said Celia. "It seems only applicable to an animal. I am glad I am not big or even tall."

"In short, you are thankful for small mercies? Well,

Celia, so am I," said her husband, good-humouredly. "Nevertheless, you must allow me to admire a fine woman when I see one."

"Of course you may, if you like."

"Cousin Derek," said Jack, "when shall you have your new garden made?"

"It is Cousin Celia who will make it, Jack."

"No, *you* must. Father does everything for mother."

"I can tell you, my boy, there was a time when mother did everything for father; even fed him occasionally."

"Were you a long-clothes baby then, dad!" cried little Maud, who was passionately fond of her father, and she tried to clamber on to his knee.

"Sit still, my darling, you will fall over," said Lady Mary, while the others laughed at the child's chatter.

"May I come and stay with you and help the gardener, Cousin Celia?" resumed Jack.

"Yes, certainly, dear. You shall often come."

"And what will become of your lessons, Jack?" asked his mother.

"Miss Holland will give me a holiday," returned the young gentleman, who was rarely at a loss.

"You must bring your pony and have a ride with me," put in Rivers.

"Do not talk so much, my love," said Lady Mary.

The morning of the day on which the party from the "Beeches" were expected was wet and blustery. Rivers and his wife had yielded to Lady Mary's wish and remained to meet them at luncheon, and, having had a romp with the children in the picture-gallery, Mrs. Rivers descended to look for her husband in the billiard-room, and succeeded in persuading him to give her a lesson, which lasted until Celia declared herself quite tired, whereupon Rivers proceeded to put the cues in their places. Celia was silent and apparently in deep thought. Suddenly she asked:

"How much money has Riversdale every year?"

A slight contraction passed over her husband's brow, and he replied, coldly, "I really do not know exactly. Almost all rent rolls have diminished of late. Why do you ask? Isn't Riversdale a good and a pleasant fellow enough to be liked for himself, without knowing how much he is worth?"

Celia started up and stood looking at him with flaming cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"How is it that you can so utterly misunderstand me? Is it wilfully or accidentally? Do you think it would make the smallest difference in my appreciation of Riversdale whether he is rich or poor?"

"If it does not, why did you put the question?"

"Lord Riversdale would never have made such a mistake," Celia continued. "He knows me *far* better than you do. I am *not* always thinking of money. If I am pleased to have it, it is because it can make us *both* happy. You ought to know by this time that I care no more for it and no less than the countesses and duchesses that *you* are accustomed to. I will tell you what I was thinking of when I asked you that unlucky question. I was thinking of the elegance and style of everything at Riversdale,—of the ease and luxury, and wishing I, too, could have everything in the same way. Then it struck me suddenly that perhaps Lord Riversdale had more money than we have, and that I never could live in the same sort of way if he has twenty thousand pounds, and I (I mean we) have only five thousand pounds a year. That is exactly what I thought."

She paused abruptly and stood silent, her bosom heaving, her red lips trembling.

"Then I ought to beg your pardon," said Rivers, slowly. "I am sorry I made such a mistake, but, everything considered, it was not unnatural. I suppose, having been long infernally harassed by impecuniosity, I hate people who can make money."

"Isn't that most unjust and unreasonable?" exclaimed Celia. "If I value money, it is for the pleasure and comfort it can buy for you as well as for me. You ought to know that. Very, very little would satisfy me. I sometimes hate being rich, because it makes you think me vulgar and common." She moved towards the door.

"No, no! By Heaven, I don't!" cried Derek, placing himself between her and it and catching her in his arms. "I believe you to be as good and generous a woman as ever lived, only—only these little misunderstandings *will* arise from the difference of our up-bringing, and I am an ill-tempered brute. No, don't turn away, sweet!"

She did not refuse his kisses, nor did she return them, but with a deep sigh drew gently away from his embrace and disappeared.

Rivers was furious with himself for his want of tact, for the stupidity of which he felt himself guilty; but he thought that the passionate caresses which for the moment he longed to lavish on her would heal the wounds he had inflicted, and so persuaded himself he was a model husband.

They did not meet, however, till luncheon was announced, and then Rivers was assigned to Lady Phipps. He had scarce time to notice that his wife, though unusually colourless, was animated and laughed a good deal.

The clouds had broken and the sun shone out after their repast was over. The company therefore strolled out on the terrace and thence through the grounds; but Celia attached herself to Sir Thomas Phipps, who seemed much pleased and flattered by her attention. He did not know that Lady Phipps had taken an opportunity to express to Mrs. Rivers her great desire to make her acquaintance.

"You know," she said, sweetly, "I used to see a great deal of Captain Rivers in India and also in London, just before he met you. I was so glad to hear he was going to be married, for he was just a little fast, but very much liked and

all that. I never thought he would choose so young a bride. He used to admire married women especially. There is a great charm, however, to *blas  d* men in freshness and inexperience. All's well that ends well, you know, and I am sure your husband must think himself a most fortunate man."

"I hope time will prove that he is," returned Celia, rather abruptly. Then Lady Phipps went on to lament that Sir Thomas had resolved on living in London, whereas her ladyship so much preferred the simplicity of the country.

When she reached this point the gentlemen joined them, and Celia received very little more attention from her.

"How frightfully ill that poor man is looking!" was Lady Mary's comment when the guests had driven away. "I do not think he can live long."

"And what a blooming widow he will leave to mourn his loss," added Rivers. "She would be most effective in weeds."

"What is the matter with her eyes?" asked his wife.

"I do not know, except that they are unusually fine."

"Yes, but there is a black line inside the lids all round," persisted Celia.

"Oh! that is kohl. Some people think it an improvement."

"I think it hideous," returned Celia, uncompromisingly.

"Fortunately, we do not all think alike," said Rivers.

"Why, Derek, you cannot admire it?"

"Why not? I feel greatly obliged to women who take pains to look well," he returned, in a dry tone.

"Only when they succeed, Derek, I suppose," said Lady Mary, smiling. "In this case I think the success would be greater if the painstaking were less. It is lovely and fresh after the rain, Celia. Will you walk with me through the woods? There is a curious sort of grotto beyond them which used to be a hermitage, and is still considered a holy place by the country people."

"I shall be delighted," cried Celia, who liked being alone with Lady Mary, and she went away to put on her hat.

Lady Mary tried to make Derek talk to her on one or two topics, but he was silent and preoccupied. A couple of hours later he and his wife took leave of their hosts and returned to their own abode.

CHAPTER X.

"I AM going into Berkhampton, to-day," said Rivers, the day Mrs. Twiss was expected. "I want to see Lascelles. There are some telegrams in the paper this morning about an uneasy feeling up in the hill country beyond Mahlapur. I'd like to know if any of the fellows at the barracks there have had further news."

"Why, Derek? If there is to be any fighting, shall you be obliged to go out?"

"Not exactly obliged; but you would not wish me to stay at home?"

"No; that is, if I might go, too."

"Ah! that would depend. At any rate, these rumours often end in smoke; but I have been up in that district and feel a good deal interested. I shall bring Lascelles back to dinner."

"Oh, yes, do."

Celia drove away to meet the four-twenty train in excellent spirits. She was always happy when alone with Derek, and it was a real pleasure to receive her attached but unpolished relative, to show her delightful new home to the only creature who belonged to her.

"Well, my dear! I really thought I never was to see you again," was Aunt Sarah's salutation, "and I must say you are looking uncommonly well,—a trifle thinner, but still remark-

ably well. What on earth made you take a house such miles and miles away from London?"

"Oh, Aunt Sarah, it is such a pretty place, and near Derek's people, who are extremely nice to me!"

"Of course they are!" ejaculated Mrs. Twiss. "You have done them a right good turn."

"Besides, it is a well-known hunting country, and Derek can get a good deal of shooting, too."

"Oh, you are the same as ever. It's all Derek—Derek. Pray, what have you to amuse yourself?"

"Plenty. I have my housekeeping and the garden, then music and books, besides dining out a good deal and giving dinners. I am learning to ride and to drive. But you will see how we live. Isn't it a pretty country, Aunt Sarah? The Grange is up among the trees on the heights in front of us. It is very pretty and comfortable. There, that turn to the left leads to Riversdale."

"Ah! that would have been the home for you. House and furniture all ready; no hiring another person's place."

"Alas! that cannot be helped now, auntie; so please admire the country and waste no more regrets on what is past recall."

"Oh, yes! the country is well enough in summer time, but you'll find it terribly dreary in the winter."

So talking, they sped along till they reached the gates. Then Aunt Sarah was keenly alive to the aspects of her niece's dwelling."

"There's not much style about your entrance, I must say," remarked Mrs. Twiss, emphatically.

"No; but a fine archway would be quite out of character. A grange is really a stone farm-house capable of being defended. Ours had a moat. It is not a grand place at all."

Here a bend of the avenue brought them in sight of the house.

Aunt Sarah was ominously silent. The weather was dull and chilly, with occasional showers, and the old grey house did not look its best.

"Why, it's not two stories high!" exclaimed Mrs. Twiss. "It has no air about it. It's quite an insignificant place. I wonder Captain Rivers would be satisfied with so shabby a concern."

"Everyone here thinks we are lucky to get it, and it is two stories high. You will like the inside I am sure, and the outside, too, when the sun shines."

Aunt Sarah gave a sort of inarticulate sound between a grunt and a moan as they drew up at the chief entrance, and Celia, as they crossed the threshold, turned and embraced her cordially, bidding her warmly welcome to her niece's new home.

Then she was conducted to the drawing-room,—a long, low apartment, evidently two rooms thrown into one, with a large conservatory at the east end and a finely-carved oak mantel-piece and over-mantel reaching to the roof. In the large open fireplace a bright wood-fire was burning. The Oriental carpets covering the highly-polished floor at intervals, the beautiful old china ornaments, the bowls of bright flowers, the general mellowness of the colouring, and a wide view from a large square, projecting window made it a delightful, reposeful room, and Mrs. Twiss sank into a luxurious easy-chair, exclaiming, "This *is* snug!"

"You will be glad of some tea, auntie, I am sure," cried Celia, taking off her hat and sitting down to pour it out. "I am sure you will like the house when you get to know it."

"Oh, it's cosy enough, but there is something mean about these low rooms. I fancied you would take a grand country place, with a fine portico and a marble hall. Indeed, I felt so sure you would, that I went the length of describing it all to Mrs. Colonel Heavysides, who was down at Lowestoft the

same time as I was, and, in a manner of speaking, you have made me tell a lie."

"No, Aunt Sarah. I will not take the responsibility," said Celia, laughing. "You ought to know by this time that I do not care for finery half so much as for prettiness and comfort."

"Just so, Celia, my dear. I always thought your taste rather low. Now, *I* have a natural liking for everything elegant. Another cup, if you please. I must say it is a first-rate cup of tea, and the cream is delicious."

Showing Aunt Sarah over the house, and duly installing her in her pleasant bed- and dressing-room occupied the rest of the afternoon; and seeing the number of servants about, the extreme dignity and respectability of the housekeeper, and the extent of the stabling visible from the windows at the back of the house, Mrs. Twiss became more reconciled to the insignificance of her niece's residence.

Dinner and the ensuing hours till bedtime were a little trying. Mrs. Twiss descended in gorgeous array,—a flame-coloured brocaded silk dress, flounced with black Brussels lace and adorned with gold passementerie, and a fan of light blue fluffy feathers, made up a somewhat ferocious whole. Lascelles, a smart young lieutenant, was the only other guest, and his presence did not help to soothe Celia's nerves. Rivers, however, always shone as a host, and was very civil and jovial with his wife's aunt. He bore her argumentative self-assertion with much patience, and the dinner was lively enough. Mrs. Twiss, not being gifted with a sense of humour, did not perceive how largely she contributed to the merriment.

"Who is that conceited young jackanapes, my dear?" was her first question when she and Celia retired to the drawing-room.

"Oh, Mr. Lascelles. He was in Derek's regiment, and has just returned from India. Derek is very fond of his regiment. I am glad he did not leave it."

"I haven't patience to listen to you. I declare you would let yourself be dragged about from one filthy barrack to another rather than contradict my lord your husband in the smallest matter, never thinking that it's your money pays for everything. You should never lose sight of *that*, and just let him know you know it."

"How can you give me such counsel, auntie! My money is the one thing likely to make unpleasantness between Derek and myself. I am sure I often wish I had none."

"Humph! that is as good as saying you wish you hadn't a husband. Do you imagine your fine gentleman would have ever asked you if you hadn't something more than your pretty brown eyes and smart little figure to attract him? I thought you had more sense."

Her words stabbed Celia's heart and put strongly, clearly, brutally, before her a detestable idea which had more than once vaguely suggested itself, and which she had firmly rejected, nor was she going to shrink before it when thus rudely incarnated by Aunt Sarah.

"If you believe what you say, you are very unkind to say it," she returned, quickly, though she grew cold and white. "Derek could not have married *anyone* who had not money, because he had been so foolishly imprudent, but there are plenty of rich women in England who would have been ready enough to marry him. I firmly believe he would never have married *anyone* he did not love. We are now nearly ten months married, and I know he is as fond of me as ever. If I am satisfied, no one has a right to question it."

"Oh, that is all very fine! But you haven't a bit of your own way. Why do you let him have his old betting, gambling, ne'er-do-weel comrades about him? This Lascelles looks a regular young rip."

"He is a nice, bright young fellow and bears a high character, or Captain Rivers would not ask him to our house. If you think I would refuse to receive any friend of my hus-

band's, you are quite mistaken. Don't say such disagreeable things, aunt. I cannot understand why you dislike Derek."

"Me! I don't dislike him, I'm sure, only you might have done much better for yourself than to marry a cavalry captain without a half-penny. He ought to remember every minute in the day all you have done for him, and there the pair of them stay on guzzling and muzzling, leaving us all by ourselves, as if we were just nobodies."

"I am sure, if Derek had an idea *how* agreeable you are making yourself, he would have come to my rescue before this," cried Celia, angrily. "You must not try to make mischief, Aunt Sarah, or I shall be forced to say I wish you had not come."

"Did I ever think I should hear my own Celia say such a thing to me!" cried Mrs. Twiss, fanning herself vigorously.

"It will be your own fault if you ever hear it again," began Celia, when the butler entered.

"If you please, 'm, Captain Rivers hopes you will come and see him and Mr. Lascelles play a match at billiards," he said.

"Oh, yes; we are coming. Now, auntie," as the man left the room, "do not be cross and odious. Come along and try and enjoy yourself. I am sure Derek is as nice as possible, and it is not right of you to attack him in this unprovoked manner."

Aunt Sarah felt she had only succeeded in injuring herself, and with a slightly bewildered feeling of surprise at her own ill-temper she followed her niece to the billiard-room, where she looked on with some interest while Lascelles beat his host, and then tried a game with Celia, while Rivers directed her strokes and pressed brandy and soda hospitably upon his not reluctant elderly guest.

Though Lady Mary Damer called on Mrs. Twiss the day after her arrival, and Riversdale came to luncheon and invited her and the Grange party to dinner when he had a real live,

elderly duke staying with him, she was not quite happy. With all her money and fine clothes, she could not get over her uneasy sense of inferiority to Rivers, his kinsfolk and acquaintances,—ay, even to Celia, whose tone and ways were changing in some undefinable manner.

She was more at ease after her host had gone with Lord Riversdale to his shooting-quarters. Then she had her little Celia all to herself, and in spite of her irresistible tendency to tease her, in spite of her rough, coarse nature, she loved her fondly in her way.

Celia was rather glad when Derek was gone. He had been very nice and polite, and she dreaded a lengthened strain on his powers of endurance, and was anxious that the last days of her aunt's visit should be happy and unruffled.

The day but one before Mrs. Twiss was to leave for London *en route* for Dieppe and Paris, they dined at Damer Court, and Celia fancied her aunt rather enjoyed her evening. The curate was of the party, and had a long discussion with Mrs. Twiss on the subject of high church *versus* evangelicalism.

He was a neat, well-bred young man, and endured some rough usage in a Christian spirit, which disposed Aunt Sarah to believe that she had made a deep impression on him.

After dinner the conversation drifted to the approaching races. There was a pretty race-course just outside Berkhampton (the county town), and considerable festivity took place in consequence of this yearly gathering.

“I quite enjoy the idea of the race-ball!” exclaimed Celia. “I really think Derek ought to dance with me, if only this once, as it is my first appearance in his county.”

“Dance with you? and why not?” exclaimed Aunt Sarah.

“I think Derek rarely dances,” said Lady Mary. “He is not a dancing-man. By-the-bye, the Wynders were here yesterday. They say Sir Thomas and Lady Phipps are coming to them for the race-week.”

"Lady Phipps!" repeated Mrs. Twiss. "Did you say Lady Phipps? She was an Indian woman, wasn't she?"

"An Anglo-Indian," said Lady Mary, smiling. "I believe so, but I really know very little about her."

"Well, I happen to know a little more than that. She was a widow with hardly a sixpence, and lived at a great rate up in Bayswater. She had all sorts and conditions of men to visit her, and made herself quite conspicuous. Finally, when all her fine colonels and captains dropped off and disappeared, she married this poor invalid, and she is killing him as fast as ever she can."

"What an accusation, my dear aunt!" cried Celia, feeling ashamed of her rancour before Lady Mary, who was so cautious and gentle in her speech.

"I know what I am talking about," said Mrs. Twiss, with an emphatic nod of her head. "She is a regular adventuress. Just the sort of woman fast men make fools of themselves about. But there! I'll say no more; only she's not the sort of person that ought to be asked to good houses, though she *is* a ladyship."

Her hearers were glad to let the subject drop, and not long after Mrs. Rivers's carriage was announced.

It was a chill, drizzling night, and Mrs. Twiss had thoroughly enjoyed a dainty dinner. When, therefore, she had been for a few minutes well wrapped up in the comfortable carriage, the warmth and easy motion overcame her, and she slept tranquilly till they arrived at the Grange.

Celia was ashamed to find how glad she was that her aunt's visit was so nearly over. "How faithless I am! Why is it that poor Aunt Sarah seems worse than she used to be?"

"Eh! What's the matter? At home? My goodness, your horses must have flown!" exclaimed Mrs. Twiss, waking up. "Do you know I don't feel quite well," she continued. "I'll just go straight to my room, and I think I should be the better of a little hot brandy and water, my love."

"Yes, of course;" and Celia desired her aunt's maid to go to the housekeeper for the desired restorative.

"Can't you sit down? I am feeling rather bad. It was that lobster cream did it, but it was wonderfully good. Just stay a bit with me, my pet! It's not often I have you to myself."

"Yes, of course I will stay with you, auntie."

"That's right. Are you sure that water is quite boiling, Jones?" to her maid, who came in with a tray, etc.

"Yes, 'm."

"Well, then, put in two lumps of sugar, and I'll ring when I want you."

There was a glowing wood-fire in the grate, and Mrs. Twiss drew her chair in front of it.

"Yes, dear," she resumed, "it *is* a comfort to have a word in peace with you, to be able to talk naturally. All these new relations of yours are so milk-and-watery, not to say wishy-washy, that one is afraid to call anything by its right name."

"It does not do to speak out too freely, though. Lady Mary, for all you know might have been a particular friend of Lady Phipps."

"Not she!" exclaimed Mrs. Twiss. "Mrs. Mactaggart, I beg her pardon, my Lady Phipps, never was in such company in her life till that poor, sickly idiot gave her his name. No; I saw you were not pleased with me when I was giving my opinion, but I didn't care. I wanted to waken *you* up, too, because it's my duty to warn you. The way I heard so much of this woman was from my friend, Mrs. Colonel Heavy-sides. She knew her in India, where very few of the real ladies would have anything to do with her. Well, she came with me to call on a friend who was up in town and living in Alexander Terrace, and as we drove up to the door, she cried out, 'Law, this is where that brazen Mrs. Mactaggart used to live.' Then I asked about her, and we spoke to the landlady; so it came out that *she* was the flighty lady who left some

photographs behind her, and Mrs. Green (the present tenant who took over most of the furniture) kept your husband's, because he was such a fine-looking man. She did not know who he was, and I didn't let it out, for all I am such an open-mouthed talker, according to *you* !”

“But, aunt, I do not think there is anything so remarkable in finding Derek's photographs among this Lady Phipps's belongings. People constantly ask for any photograph they take a fancy to, and a gentleman could hardly refuse a lady.”

“Oh, yes; make light of it, but take my advice. Keep her at a distance, and don't let her get hold of your husband. Remember, he was a fast man, my dear, a very fast man. Mrs. Colonel Heavysides has heard a good bit about him, too, and my Lady Phipps is——”

“I am sure the last sort of woman Derek would like. You don't know how fastidious he is.”

“Yes, about *you* or his sister or any one belonging to him; but there's another side to the fancies of these fastidious, fine gentlemen, and *I* can tell you they are not so particular in some directions.”

“You are tired, I am sure, auntie, and I must not keep you up; so, good-night. I'll ring for Jones.”

“Oh, it is all very well; but you remember my warning when that hussy comes down here. God bless my love. Good-night.”

Mrs. Twiss swallowed the last drop of her brandy and water, setting down the tumbler with a bang and the partly audible words, “To think of *that* woman being a ladyship, and my elegant girl, with all her money, being only plain Missis Derek Rivers !”

CHAPTER XI.

"I FANCY you are not obliged to me for having taken Derek off to the moors," said Lord Riversdale, as he sat down by Celia's work-table.

She was sitting in one of the delightful projecting windows of the drawing-room, from which there was a wide view over the plain and a wooded hill to the north. He had returned with Rivers to dine and sleep at the Grange on his way home. "I am afraid you have been rather moped."

"It *has* been very tranquil," returned Celia, with rather a languid smile. "But I should not have felt dull, only poor, dear, little Maud has the measles, and, as I never had that malady, your sister is cut off from me, and as yet my neighbours are rather strange. I did think of asking Miss Wilmot to stay here, but I feared she would be bored."

"She would have been very pleased to come, I am sure. I fancy she is inclined to be chums with you. Capital girl, Gertrude! Wonder she never married! She is a deucedly handsome woman, and I know she has rejected one or two very good offers."

"I suppose the right man never appeared."

"Perhaps so. Anyhow, she is going abroad next week. The vicar is gouty, so he is ordered to some place in France which works wonders. Of course, Gertrude accompanies him. They are devoted to each other. But I am vexed about this attack of measles. I wanted Mary to do lady of the house for me," continued Riversdale, "and of course she is a fixture at the Court. I am going to fill the house if I can, and expect some lady guests. I wish you would come and do hostess, Mrs. Rivers?"

"Pray do not ask me, dear Riversdale," exclaimed Celia, blushing with apprehension. "I am quite unequal to such

an undertaking. I tremble to think of all the mistakes I should make and the scrapes I should get into."

"Why, I fancied you were game for anything; quite the most plucky girl I ever met,—I mean socially."

"I fancy that was the daring of ignorance. Now, Derek is teaching me prudence and a little self-distrust."

"I shall never forgive him if he breaks your spirit."

"Break my spirit!" cried Celia. "What a terrible phrase! There is no fear of such a thing. If I thought he would deliberately try anything so cruel, he should find my spirit very *unbreakable*."

"He would be a fool to try. A spiritless wife must be a horrid infliction."

Here further confidential talk was put an end to by the entrance of Rivers himself, who bestowed as affectionate a greeting on his wife as his sense of Riversdale's presence would permit.

"And how have you amused yourself since your aunt left you?" he asked, kindly.

"Oh, in many ways. I have been driving the ponies every afternoon, and Dixon says I am greatly improved."

"By the way, Derek, when I was up in town yesterday, I met our friend, Lady Phipps, in Piccadilly. She was talking of coming down to the 'Beeches' for the race-week, but said she feared she should not see much of the races, as old Wynder objects to take his horses so far every day, so I asked her and her spouse to Riversdale. She at once accepted."

"She will be dazzling at the ball. Won't she get herself up in 'gorgeous' array for such an occasion!" observed Rivers.

"What was her name before she married Sir Thomas Phipps?" asked Celia.

"She was a Mrs. Mactaggart," he returned; "and when I first met her she was, I thought, the handsomest woman I had ever seen. She had such style,—such go. When I came

back to England she was a widow, and used to give such jolly little dinners. She had such interesting card parties, too. Eh? You remember my introducing you, Riversdale? You were A 1 for a considerable time."

"A 1, my dear fellow! That was *your* place, and you had no rival near the throne."

Rivers laughed. "It was a promotion that never brought me *luck*," he said, significantly. Then the subject dropped, but not from Celia's thoughts. All her husband and his kinsman had said dwelt in her memory, strengthening and deepening the impression her aunt's description of this objectionable Lady Phipps had created, in spite of the brave front she had presented to Aunt Sarah's attack.

Still, she had common sense enough not to feel seriously disturbed. Yet she could not help wondering at Derek's evident admiration for a woman who seemed to *her* worse than bad style, who was, she felt, rather than reasoned, moulded in baser metal and then lacquered—cleverly lacquered, she admitted—with a coating of elegance and ease of manner.

"How is it he can look at her! not as compared with me,—I know I am not polished to the degree *he* would like,—but after being accustomed to *such* a woman as his cousin. I wish I were like her, but I shall never be. My nature is different, and, whatever I am, I will *not* imitate."

While these thoughts were flashing through her brain her husband was speaking of his annoyance at the enforced absence of Lady Mary. "I daresay that little imp Maud would do perfectly well without her mother, and you would be ever so much better with a mistress of the ceremonies, Riversdale."

"Of course I should. I fancy Mary thinks she would not be a very welcome guest, fresh from the sick-room of a measly patient!"

"Oh, nonsense! Measles are nothing to be afraid of. Damer will come, I know, and Preston—he is at the Court."

"Indeed!" cried Celia. "I shall be so glad to see him. He is delightful."

"This wife of mine has a very catholic taste," said Derek, smiling. "First, she is enchanted at the idea of welcoming Lascelles, who never looks at a book except the racing calendar. Then she is overjoyed to find she is to renew her acquaintance with Preston, who breathes science and literature with every pulse-beat."

"Oh, I am nothing if not inconsistent," returned Celia. "Also, I am not sorry to see a certain truant, Derek Rivers, sometimes, who does not care much for either science or literature, and whose reading is generally limited to newspapers."

"That's a fair hit," said Riversdale, laughing.

"Newspapers are the history of to-day and most improving. Great powers, Celia! I am not a dunce."

"There is the dressing-bell," said Celia, sympathetic on the subject of dress, so did not trouble him with her views on garments. On this matter there was a struggle in Celia's mind. She liked her own taste, yet she also liked to please her husband. This led to a degree of indecision fatal to her influence.

If she could believe completely in herself, if she had unbounded faith in her husband's judgment, either conviction would lead to a distinct line of action.

The races began on Tuesday, and the local paper announced that "Mrs. Derek Rivers" was exquisitely "gowned" in "forget-me-not blue," with darker blue velvet decorations, and wore a bonnet of black lace, with blue feathers.

Derek was graciously pleased to remark that she had got herself up remarkably well.

They had brought back Mr. Damer and Preston to dinner, and the day was most successful. Their guests remained for the night, as the races began earlier next day.

Damer gave a good account of his little girl's state, and

said that as soon as the doctor gave permission Lady Mary would take her to Torquay for change of air.

Preston was the first to join the young hostess in the drawing-room.

"You have chosen a charming abode, Mrs. Rivers," he said, drawing a chair beside the high carved oak settle in the chimney-nook, where she was sitting when he entered the drawing-room. "I remember you were on the lookout for one when I had the pleasure of meeting you in London some months ago."

"Yes, it is a nice old place, isn't it? Just the sort of place I wanted. Do you know I am sometimes a little frightened at having everything I wish for, or at least nearly everything."

"And, oh! if fortune fill thy sail
With more than a propitious gale,
Take half thy canvas in!"

quoted Preston, smiling.

"That sounds painfully wise. Who says it?" asked Celia, earnestly.

"Horace *via* Cowper."

"Cowper! I have never read his poems. Wasn't he mad?"

"Yes; but he had a real poetic touch."

"I must read his works, some day. Another poet I must confess to being quite ignorant of,—Wordsworth. I never could get on with Wordsworth, though I have tried."

"Then you have a treat before you, I am sure; only you must be just a little bit older."

"Are you fond of poetry? I should have imagined you were too learned and scientific to care for it."

"Poetry is beyond all learning and science. It is inspiration. I mean poetry, not rhyme."

"Yes, there is a great difference. I used to write rhyme

myself. Could you imagine it! But it was all nonsense verses to make my school-fellows laugh."

"I thought young ladies only wrote on sentimental subjects."

"I was always more given to laugh than to sentimentalise. Oh! Mr. Preston, are you going to back Lord Riversdale's horse?"

"No. I am very fond of horses, but I rarely bet. That is a different matter from being a judge of a horse. Are *you* backing him? Is he the favourite?"

"No. Colonel Cochran's 'Brownstout' is the favourite. He is not comparable to 'Red Gauntlet,' Riversdale's horse."

"I fancy your wish is—shall I say mother?—to your opinion."

"Ah! you do not think my opinion worth much, Mr. Preston. Well, if 'Red Gauntlet' wins, I shall be rich in gloves. I have bets with Mr. Lascelles and Captain Rivers and young Mr. Wynder."

Here the other men joined them and their conversation was at an end.

Preston was struck by the joyous animation of his young hostess. She was slightly restless, moving to and fro, sitting first by one guest, then by another, talking frankly, abundantly, to everyone.

He also noticed that Rivers watched her from time to time, as if not quite pleased.

"He is a good fellow, or I am much mistaken," he mused. "Yet he may be a little overbearing. He must surely be fond of such a buoyant, candid, intelligent creature as his wife. Yet I am not so sure."

"Celia," said Rivers, as he was about to follow the other men to the smoking-room, "Riversdale is going to call for me early to-morrow,—earlier than you need to start,—and you are going to chaperon old Dixon's daughter." (Dixon was the Mayor of Berkhampton.) "So you can take Preston

and George Damer. Lascelles will drive over in the dog-cart if Riversdale hasn't room for him."

"Very well," said Celia, contentedly.

"And you had better get to bed. You must be awfully tired."

"No, I am not, indeed," she returned, slipping her arm through his and pressing it to her side in her gratitude for his care and thought of her.

Derek did not return the pressure, and said, coldly, "You seemed rather excited this evening, which is always a sign of over-fatigue."

Excited! She understood him well. She had talked and enjoyed herself too much, too thoughtlessly, and he was not pleased. Was she noisy and vulgar? Why must she be perpetually on guard? Her vivid sense of life and enjoyment was suddenly paralysed; her joyous anticipations of a delightful, triumphant day to-morrow extinguished.

She sat in deep thought while her maid brushed her hair, comparing the present with the past. Derek was certainly changed, since he had been so complaisant and caressing during those happy, idle first days of their marriage. Nothing seemed worth the trouble of contradicting. But was *he* happy then? She began to doubt it. Absence of congenial occupation must have bored him, and they were away from all his friends, his people, his set. He was more active and alert now; more interested, but also less well-tempered. She saw more and more that he could do without her, but happily Celia had some common sense. Much as she loved having her husband with her, she told herself that no man who was worth his salt would be content to be tied to his wife's apron-string. No, of course not; but he need not be cross. If he were, why, she would not want him. She had done everything she could to please him except to change her nature, and that she could not manage, even if she would.

CHAPTER XII.

SLEEP did not stay peaceably with Celia that night, and she heard with no small uneasiness the patter of rain against the windows during the silent hours. What if the weather had changed and the great day were spoiled by cloudy skies and drenching showers?

When, however, her maid opened the blinds next morning, the sunshine streaming into the room reassured her. She therefore dressed with hope and alacrity.

The talk at breakfast was all about the expected race and the ball which was to succeed it. The great event of the week was timed to come off at two o'clock, so Riversdale arrived a little after twelve, as he had various matters to settle previous to the start, and Berkhampton was five miles from the Grange.

He drove up in a waggonette, and beside him on the box was Lady Phipps, in an exquisite bonnet of lilac and black lace, with velvet pansies of a darker hue, which admirably suited and softened her rich colouring; a dust cloak hid the glories of a dress to match, but did not conceal the grace of her finely-moulded shoulders.

Mr. Wynder was the only other occupant of the conveyance besides the groom in attendance.

Celia and Preston went out to speak to the noble charioteer and wish him good luck.

"How do you do, Mrs. Rivers?" cried Lady Phipps. "I see you are wisely saving yourself for the excitement of the day. I came early, for Sir Thomas is suffering from neuralgia this morning, and I took the opportunity of coming in to get a very special prescription made up. I think it wiser to see a

country chemist about it myself. I shall then send a messenger with it to Riversdale."

"There is a very clever chemist at Berkhampton, I assure you," returned Celia, "as Lord Riversdale could have told you, and you might have stayed with Sir Thomas."

She had hardly uttered the words before she would have done anything to recall them.

"He has an admirable valet, a native, who has been with him for years, or I would certainly not have left him. Oh, Mr. Wynder, would you mind changing places with me? I find the wind rather keen on this bad eminence."

"Certainly not, Lady Phipps," and the admiring youth descended from the carriage with alacrity.

"Is Lascelles ready?" called Lord Riversdale from the box; "for I can't wait. I promised to lunch with Cochran at one sharp. Here, Derek, jump in. We'll meet at the grandstand, Celia."

"I don't think Mr. Lascelles intends to go with you. He is writing letters at present," she returned, while she watched her husband assist Lady Phipps to leave the box and get into the waggonette, following her to wrap a rug carefully over her knees and take his place opposite.

"All right?" called Riversdale. "Let them go!"

The groom obeyed, and the carriage started at a rapid pace down the approach.

Celia tried to laugh at herself for feeling a sense of discomfort and irritation when her husband was thus carried off in a sort of triumph by the woman to whom she had taken an unreasoning dislike.

An hour later, after an early luncheon, Celia and her guests set out for the race-course, stopping on the way at the mayor's house. The mayor was a stanch adherent of the Rivers family, and Riversdale had hinted to Celia that if Derek ever thought of standing for Berkhampton he would be a valuable agent.

His daughter was ready and in her best "go-to-meeting garb," waiting for the arrival of her escort, and highly pleased to appear under the protection of so distinguished a chaperon. After a brief delay they drove on, their way leading through the High Street, which was crowded with people hastening to the race-course.

Now, Celia had had what she considered the happy thought to dress herself in the Riversdale colours,—scarlet and white,—which were also the earl's racing colours. She was therefore rather a conspicuous figure. Her dress of white cashmere, with a scarlet velvet sash and bretelles; her mantle scarlet satin, covered with heavy white lace; a parasol to correspond. Her bonnet, of white satin and scarlet velvet, was rather trying to her fair hair and complexion. This striking costume and her smart turn-out, drawn by a pair of high-stepping roans, as they went at a good pace, the crowd parting to let the carriage pass, attracted all eyes; and, the Riversdale family being well known and extremely popular, a cheer was soon raised. "Hurrah for the scarlet and white!" "Riversdale forever!" ran along the ranks of workingmen who were pressing towards the scene of the great race.

This sudden outburst thrilled Celia with an extraordinary sense of excitement and elation. She felt as a popular sovereign might when returning from some proud achievement. Her soft, laughing brown eyes glittered with satisfaction, and Damer, laughing, took off his hat, exclaiming, "This is quite a triumphal progress, Mrs. Rivers."

"It is quite delightful," she exclaimed, smiling and bowing right and left. "How nice of the people to cheer the Riversdale colours. I do hope it is a good omen, and that they will come in triumphant."

"This is the first time I ever shared in a popular reception," said Preston; "though I am only the fly on the coach-wheel."

"Isn't it fun?" cried Miss Dixon. "They cheered my father just like this when he was elected mayor a second time last year. It makes one's heart beat, doesn't it?"

And still the cheers went on, chiefly, perhaps, from the sense of holiday-making, of being out for the express object of amusing themselves, which incites children and mobs to make a noise. And, finally, a dawning idea that it was all rather ridiculous made Celia glad to get into the shelter of the grandstand.

There she was very warmly received by those members of the county society to whom she was known, and before the exchange of greetings was over the horses began to assemble and their riders to try them with short preliminary canters. One of the last to appear was "Red Gauntlet," a bright bay, whose action and many good points were much admired by the connoisseurs around her, and whose language on the subject was quite incomprehensible to Celia. She had never been at a race before, and knew little or nothing about horses. Nevertheless, she entered warmly into the interest and excitement of the scene, and eagerly put into various sweepstakes, backing "Red Gauntlet" freely.

It was a pretty scene; a flat piece of land between the town and the river, which, after traversing it, made a wide sweep, enclosing the space used as a race-course. A range of villas formed the boundary on the town side, while beyond the river rose a steep bank, covered with brambles, bracken, and abundant heather, now wearing a rich purple tint. Here numbers of spectators ranged themselves, while for a considerable distance right and left of the stand and judges' box a closely-packed crowd at either side made a living wall, while overhead were blue skies and bright sunshine.

Celia watched the men going in out of the saddling paddock with eager eyes, trying to make out her husband, whom she had not seen since morning. She found him at last by the aid of field-glasses sent her by Lascelles. He was talking

and laughing with a group of men, among whom she distinguished Riversdale and Colonel Cochran. At that moment he looked up and waved his hand to her, she thought, with keen pleasure, and she was just about to return the salute, when the motion of a hand,—a pale lilac hand on her right,—attracted her attention, and, leaning forward, she perceived the hand belonged to Lady Phipps. Was Derek's acknowledgment directed to her? or did she appropriate what was intended for Celia?

For a moment a stinging sense of annoyance sent a quiver of irritation along her veins. The next she was absorbed in watching the process of "clearing the course." Then came the thrilling moment of the start. The shout "They're off!" "They're away!" ran through the mass of spectators, and the beautiful animals with their many-coloured riders started in a wonderfully straight line, but as they got into their stride a green-and-black jockey shot out from the ruck, to Celia's dismay, as her idea of a race was going ahead from the first and coming in a long way in front of all competitors.

"Who—whose horse is that going so fast, the green-and-black man?" she asked, eagerly.

"Oh! that is Thorpe's horse, 'The General.' Who is riding him? Doesn't know much about his business, I fancy! Let me look at your card?"

"There! there's another coming up close to him—pink and blue. It does not look at all well. Oh, Mr. Damer! he is passing 'The General.' Now they are close together. Why, oh, why does 'Red Gauntlet' lag behind?"

"You'll see presently." So on through the whole race. The course was a small one, and "twice round" was the distance prescribed for the "cup" race. When the horses passed the grandstand the second time, Celia felt rather than perceived that the interest and excitement were growing intense. Now she observed that "Scarlet and White" was creeping up to "The General," and as they came round the

curve of the course near the winning-post the struggle was evidently between "The General" and "Red Gauntlet," while "Green and Black" was a good third. Now "Pink and Blue" gradually pushed on in front. They were nearing the winning-post, and Celia clasped her hands as if in prayer. "Oh, oh! can't he go quicker?" she cried. As she spoke, the bay quickened his pace, darting forward by a sudden effort of the strength his jockey had so carefully saved, and flew past the goal half a horse's length before "The General." Shouts of delight for the famous colours rang out again and again, and Celia, drawing a long breath, unconsciously clasped Damer's arm tight, exclaiming, "He has won, after all!"

Then she remained quite silent amid the loud hum of talk, every one relieving the tension of their nerves by eager discussion of the event which had just come off, until she saw Riversdale, followed by Derek, come into the stand. Then she stretched out her hand and called him rather audibly.

Riversdale made his way to her at once. "Oh, I *am* so glad!" she exclaimed. "I was sure 'Red Gauntlet' would have lost. I was trembling all over; and then what a splendid rush he made!"

"Many thanks. I was pretty sure of him. Why, what a trump you are to wear my colours. Isn't she, Derek? By Jove! I think you brought me luck."

"Yes. Celia must be a most devoted partisan to present herself in such a get-up. Nothing more trying to her complexion could well be contrived," returned Rivers, with what seemed to his wife a deadly look of disapprobation. She flushed to the roots of her hair, for she fondly believed her toilette was charming, and that her husband would be highly pleased at the idea of her wearing the family colours.

Her emotion was not all distress at his rebuke; it was quite as much resentment at what she, not unjustly, considered his rudeness. If he disliked her dress, he might have waited

to tell her so when they were alone. So, turning to Lord Riversdale, she said, emphatically, "I am so glad *you* are pleased. I hope your colours will bring *me* luck, too, though Derek seems to think they make a fright of me, which is rather unfortunate," and she laughed loudly.

"They would be extraordinary colours if they made a fright of *you*!" exclaimed the earl, gallantly, and vexed at the snub Derek thought fit to administer to his good-natured, unoffending wife. "You must open the ball with me, to-night."

"Yes, with great pleasure," cried Celia, looking angrily after her husband, who had almost immediately moved away and taken a seat beside Lady Phipps, with whom he talked for a considerable time with an air of great interest.

Meantime, Lord Riversdale gave his arm to Celia, and she made a sort of triumphant progress among the county magnates, their wives and daughters, who thronged the stand, with many of whom she had not as yet made acquaintance, and who were presented to her with much *empressement* by her noble escort.

Celia behaved with much spirit and amiability. She expressed her enjoyment of the first race she had ever seen, her admiration of the country, her pleasure in country life, with considerable volubility, and was voted a well-meaning and rather good-looking plebeian, or would be good looking if she had not spoiled herself by her flaring dress.

There was another race for "the consolation stakes," but the charm and excitement were over for Celia, though she managed to present an air of interest and animation. She talked a great deal to Lascelles, who kept at her side, and even assumed an air of flirting with him very successfully. Directly this race was over, however, she sent Lascelles to look for Rivers, as she wanted to go home and rest before going to the ball. Rivers came at once, looking much more amiable than when he had left her.

"I'll put you into the carriage," he said, "if Lascelles will call it up. Come and speak to Lady Phipps. You have quite neglected her."

Celia was greatly tempted to refuse, but had the sense to resist. Moreover, she was too proud not to be perfectly civil, so they exchanged a few nothings with extreme politeness, Celia at parting expressing a hope that Lady Phipps would find Sir Thomas better and able to let her go to the ball.

"She will be one of the belles," said Rivers, as he led his wife towards the stairs; "and she certainly knows how to dress herself. Her bonnet is a dream."

"Yes; it suits her perfectly. Those quiet colours are the right thing for elderly women," said Celia, sweetly. Derek looked at her and burst out laughing.

"You are improving," he said. "That was a capital hit. Believe me, though, Lady Phipps will be charming for some years yet. Don't be cross. It doesn't suit you."

"No?" she returned, interrogatively. "It will never do if both my mood and my garments are unbecoming. Oh, there is Mr. Damer. I am going home," she went on. "Will you come?"

"Yes, with pleasure. I have had quite enough; and Preston is ready, too."

Here Lascelles made his way to them. "The carriage is waiting," he said; "but Miss Dixon does not want to go just yet, so I will take charge of her."

"Thank you; I am very tired," said Celia, conscious of a disgraceful desire to cry.

She was indeed glad to be rolling homewards, but her anticipations of the ball were terribly damped, though she strove to rouse herself up and determined to enjoy it.

Preston and Mr. Damer did nearly all the talking, yet the way seemed long, and when she at last reached home, she left her guests to pour out their own tea; and, having got into a comfortable gown, she dismissed her maid, locked her door,

and, it must be confessed, cried herself into a sound and refreshing sleep.

* * * * *

The race-ball that year was exceptionally brilliant, and, for that and other reasons hereafter to be told, was long remembered by the Berkhamptonites.

Lord Riversdale brought a large party, including the Marchioness of Carlingford and a fair daughter, who had been the belle of the previous season; also that handsome Lady Phipps, who was so gentle and complaisant. Then the county member, General Loftus, and his party, among which were several notorieties, added interest to the gathering, and, though last, far from least, Derek Rivers and his rich wife, who was really better than the county ladies expected.

Immensely refreshed and restored to herself by the restful oblivion of her sleep, Celia dressed most carefully for the ball, and, discarding all colour, she clothed herself in white brocade, lace, and diamonds.

The gown, which came from a first-rate modiste, suited her well, and, certain that Rivers could *not* find any fault with such an inoffensive costume, her spirits rose; but still her mood was far from what she expected it would be.

Though Rivers had been pleasant and genial at dinner, and in no way negligent of his wife, the impression that he ought to have come to her with some peace offering in the way of apology for his rudeness in the morning, which was the culmination of many trifling slights, rankled in her heart. She well knew that, had she by any outbreak of temper, any heedlessness of speech, grated her husband's feelings, she would have been eager to make ample amends and pour the oil and wine of warmest love and tenderness into any wound she might have made. Why should he not do the same? If he loved her, he could not have been content with an unspoken reconciliation.

She determined that she would not give more than she

received. Why should she? But, even while she made this brave resolve, a flash of thought, like lightning on a dark night, showed her what a gloomy, stony future lay before her if she was obliged to tread the road of life at enmity with her husband or hardening under his indifference. Pride, however, helped her to present a fair face to join brightly in the conversation and laugh merrily at the good, bad, and indifferent things said.

"So you are not going to share in the revelry to-night?" said Rivers to George Damer, as they gathered at the entrance where the carriages waited.

"No, thanks. I'll have a smoke and go to bed. I am no dancer, and I should feel like a fish out of water without my wife. We always go to the cup-race and ball as a county institution. By the way, I found a letter from Mary when I came back to-day. Maud is decidedly improving."

"I am so glad to hear it," cried Celia, shaking hands with him. "Now you will be sure to sleep well. Good-night."

The ball had begun when the Grange party arrived, and the first waltz was in progress. Celia was much more familiar with balls than with races, and was somewhat surprised that anything outside London could be so well done. They found Lord Riversdale waiting for them near the entrance.

"Ah, Mrs. Rivers, you are faithless," he said. "I was obliged to hide myself during the first quadrille to avoid being victimised by Mrs. Thorpe, who, in Mary's absence, considers herself the first lady of Brookshire—and she is about twenty stone—all because you failed me."

"Mrs. Rivers," cried Lascelles, "pray give me the next waltz;" and he stood, card in hand, waiting her permission to put down her name.

"The next quadrille for me," put in Riversdale. "I should be sorry to inflict myself on any one for a waltz. Derek, come and be introduced to Lady Carlingford. She says she had a son in your regiment. Mr. Preston——"

“Do not trouble yourself about me, Lord Riversdale. I am a non-combatant—I mean a non-dancer,” and Celia was launched. She had hoped that her husband would have given her a dance in honour of her first public appearance in his county in spite of the little cloud between them. Perhaps he would take that opportunity of expressing some caressing words to obliterate the stings inflicted by his thoughtlessness. Had it not been for her reluctant sense of resentment she would have asked him, but this her pride would not permit, so she watched him moving about talking to old acquaintances, laughing and apparently enjoying himself, while she remarked, with a strange thrill of mingled love and annoyance, that he was the finest and most distinguished-looking man in the room.

By and by she saw him lead Lady Phipps to a place in the quadrille which was forming before supper, and was astonished and vexed to find how fast her heart beat. What a wild desire to run and draw Derek away anywhere shivered through her. It was a mere piece of civility, and she was contemptibly foolish to let such a trifle affect her; but it did—how keenly none but herself could know.

“I am very tired, Mr. Lascelles,” she said, when that gentleman came to fetch her; “would you mind sitting it out?”

“I should be delighted. There is a pretty sort of tent conservatory off the staircase. Come and have a chat there.”

From this time the ball became a dim, distressing phantasmagoria to Celia. She danced with various strangers and answered endless questions, promised to go to endless garden parties, and echoed a variety of politely expressed hopes that they were going to be good neighbours, uttered by numerous dowagers; but to Derek she only spoke twice—once when he came and asked her if she would dine at Riversdale next day, as the earl was getting up an impromptu party, and, secondly, when she sent for him to say she was so tired she must go

home, when he observed kindly he was afraid she had done too much, adding that Preston would take care of her, as he and Lascelles wanted to stay a little later, but he saw to her wraps and put her into the carriage himself.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE dinner at Riversdale was as lively and amusing as the earl's entertainments usually were, and Celia was diverted from her gloomy thoughts by the natural attraction which "sweetness and light" possess for youth.

Rivers had been carelessly good-humoured and apparently quite unconscious of having given any cause of offence—a mental condition which, in his wife's opinion, pointed unmistakably to indifference.

"Must I get accustomed to it?" she already asked herself, and then tried to ease her heart by accusing her own exacting greed for attention and spoiling, rather than Derek's neglect, as the source of her unhappiness.

Lord Riversdale's house-party was to break up in a few days, and Derek suggested that they should be invited to an informal dinner at the Grange. His wife was highly pleased with the idea, and proceeded to carry it out to the best of her ability.

Lady Carlingford and her daughter went on their way to other country houses the day after the dinner, so the Riversdale party was reduced to Sir Thomas and Lady Phipps, a Mrs. Dykes, a smart, young, and popular woman, her attendant husband, three society men, and Riversdale himself.

Celia was very pleased at the prospect of this entertainment. She was quite drawn out of herself, her disappointment and distress, by the consultations and arrangement with

Mrs. Rouse, the housekeeper, which it necessitated; also she questioned her husband respecting many points. He was not able to help her much, being accustomed to think that these matters arranged themselves, yet feeling aggrieved if anything went wrong.

"Oh! the cook and Mrs. Rouse will know what we ought to have to eat, and I suppose Sykes (the butler) can put the flowers and things in order."

"Why, Derek, do you think I should let anyone but myself touch the flowers?"

"Isn't it rather tiresome for you?"

"Don't you know I always arrange them myself?"

"Do you? You are quite energetic."

So saying, Rivers departed to ride over to Damer Court and persuade its master to give up his journey to Torquay, where Lady Mary and her little convalescent were staying, and dine with them the next day,—a useless task, for Damer was wearying for a sight of wife and children.

* * * * *

The morning of the day on which Mrs. Derek Rivers was to give her first dinner-party in Brookshire was dull and misty. Her husband had been out with his gun for a tramp across the turnip-fields, hoping to bring down a few partridges, and came into luncheon well content with his success.

He found Celia rather uneasy about a letter she had just had from Aunt Sarah, in which she gave an indifferent account of herself. Mrs. Twiss wrote from Paris, where she had been staying with her friend, Mrs. Colonel Heavysides. She had seen the doctor of the embassy, a very first-rate man, she told her niece, *and* an "honourable," she added, with a note of admiration. He thought her heart weak and her circulation bad, so she was going home immediately, as she did not think French food agreed with her.

"Poor Aunt Sarah! I must go and see her, Derek."

"Oh, yes, of course. I can have a few days' shooting on

the moors while you are away, and then Mary will be coming back."

"I hope that sweet little Maud will be quite well by the time she returns. It is such a bad time to have whooping-cough."

Here Mr. Preston, who had prolonged his stay, came in, and private conversation was at an end. He was to leave next morning for Yorkshire.

Luncheon finished, the men strolled out to the stables, and Celia went to the library to write to Aunt Sarah, and before she had quite finished Rivers came in.

"Preston has gone in to Berkhampton to call on some of the worthies there," he said, settling himself into an easy-chair which stood at the end of the writing-table, so that he looked straight into his wife's face.

"By the way, Celia," he began, after a short pause, "Riversdale goes away north on Monday, so his guests depart on Saturday. Now, I fancy Lady Phipps doesn't want to leave the neighbourhood just yet. There's to be some sort of function at old Dixon's the end of next week, and she is invited."

"Yes, I know. New colours are to be presented to the volunteers by Mrs. Dixon, and there is to be a large luncheon party."

"Well, Lady Phipps wants to go. You had better ask her and Sir Thomas to stay here for a week or ten days."

"Can't she go to their friends, the Wynders?" returned Celia, in rather a dry tone, as she added a few lines to her letter.

"I don't think she cares to go there. She gets bored, for that ass, young Wynder, makes a fool of himself."

"Or she makes a fool of him," said Celia, folding up her letter and putting it into the envelope.

"That is a spiteful little speech, Celia. I imagined you were above petty jealousy."

"I hope I am; but I am not above disapprobation," she replied, and she turned towards him, resting her arm on the table.

"You do not mean to say you would refuse to receive her?"

"First tell me, have you invited Sir Thomas Phipps and his wife to stay here?"

"No. Certainly not, without consulting you. I should not be so ill-bred."

"And if you had, Derek, I never should have put you in so false a position as to refuse to receive them."

"Well, don't do it now. What reasonable objection have you?"

"Lady Phipps is not the sort of woman I wish to have as a guest. She is a successful adventuress. I am sure Lady Mary does not care to know her."

"She would not refuse to invite Lady Phipps if Damer asked her."

"Perhaps not; but George Damer never threw away his money playing with her when she kept a gambling-house."

"Why, Celia! What do you mean? What the deuce do you know about my old acquaintance, Lady Phipps?" Rivers asked, with a slightly derisive smile, which fired Celia's already ruffled temper.

"I know enough to feel sure that if I wanted to ask a young man, or rather elderly man with some sort of doubtful history, to your house, *you* would object."

"My dear child, you know nothing about it; and, if you think I ever played much at Mrs. Mactaggart's, you are quite mistaken. How do you know I paid more than an occasional visit to Lady Phipps in those bygone days?"

"You must have been tolerably intimate to have given her your photograph."

"My photograph!" repeated Rivers, with a puzzled look. "I remember nothing about it. I daresay she asked lots of

fellows for their photos. Who on earth told you such an absurd story. I feel sure there isn't a word of truth in it."

"And I am sure there is," cried Celia, quickly, "for Aunt Sarah recognised the likeness herself when she called at the house where Mrs. Mac—I mean Lady Phipps—used to live. She had sold all the furniture, including the portraits of her dear friends. I wonder how much yours fetched, Derek," and she laughed a genuine laugh at the idea of selling such trifling personalities; "quite eighteen-pence, I should think, if it was that smart one in uniform you had done for me."

"Your Aunt Sarah is a mischief-making old cat!" cried Rivers, nettled by her being able to treat any matter concerning him so lightly; "and I thought *you* had more sense."

"Thank you for your appreciation of the only person, perhaps, in the world who really loves me," said Celia, with a sudden change of tone.

"You have lost your temper, and don't know what you are talking about. We are wandering from the point. Just sit down and write a nice civil note to Lady Phipps asking her to stay——"

"No, Derek, I will *not*!"

"Have I not the right to ask any friends I choose to my own house? You are so ignorant of social usages that I must instruct you. There is no use in trying to cut people whom the world tolerates. I put up with your gossiping aunt, whose manners are, to say the least, not first-rate, and you——"

"Refuse to put up with your friend, whose morals don't seem to me of the highest tone, and who, in my opinion, is decidedly bad style."

"You are utterly foolish, Celia, to affront me in this way. I suppose I am master in my own house. Why do you not yield to my wishes?"

"And why do you not yield to mine, Derek?" she said, in a softer tone; "am I not always too glad to make my life on

the pattern you like? I may be unreasonable in my dislike of this woman ; nevertheless, you shall *not* force her upon me."

"You are unwise to set my authority at defiance, Celia. I will not let you trample me under your feet. The women of my class know how to show well-bred respect to their husbands."

"And the women of mine," interrupted Celia, with sparkling eyes and heightened colour, "know how to load theirs with benefits which awaken neither love nor gratitude."

"Love cannot be bought," said Rivers, grimly. "Be warned, Celia. I once told you I would not bear a second insult. If we are to be friends, give up your absurd opposition to my wishes and welcome my friends to my house as you ought."

"Any one of them except this woman is welcome to me. If you have a right to ask whom you like to your house, I have the right to exclude those I *dislike* from mine. And this *is* mine, and everything is mine except the love, which all I have given—freely given—cannot win."

"That is enough," said Rivers, with deadly composure. "You will have it—and you shall."

He had already been walking to and fro ; he now turned and left the room.

Celia stood for a moment quite still, an awful sense of having burnt her ships turning her to stone. Rivers would certainly fulfil his threat, and what was to become of her? What should she do? Her heart seemed to stand still. She could have screamed aloud to Derek to come back, to forgive, to love her—only to love her—and she would submit to anything, everything. But, no. She must not throw her self-respect to the winds. She might have been over-hasty, but Derek was wrong too, and, dearly as she loved him, she would not be his slave. If she were false to herself now, she should never, *never* recover it. At any rate, Derek could not leave her to-day, when guests were coming, and that would

give him time to think. Ah ! if he would only say a word of apology or make the smallest advance to reconciliation, how gladly, how fondly she would accept it. But Derek had been so indifferent of late. He had not been gentle or caressing. What had changed him? No ; bitter as the effort was, she would stick to her colours. Derek exacted too much. She would not let him put his foot on her neck. Should she go after and speak to him? No ; she had not the courage to do that, he looked so stern. He was so *awful* when he was vexed, so delightful when he was tender. Was she right? Was she wrong? Where could she turn for advice? She could never complain of Derek to any one, never ! His faults were her affair. She had lost the knack of pleasing or managing, and she must suffer, but she could not bear to hear another find fault with him. After all, there was nothing very serious in their quarrel. She almost regretted her refusal to receive Lady Phipps, but, having done so, it would be cowardly—it would be false to herself—to retract.

After all, why should it be more incumbent on her to give in than on Derek? She wished she had not mentioned her own gifts. Why was it that they always thrust themselves forward to embitter any little altercation which occurred between them? For an instant she wished she had had no fortune. Then her aunt's remark came back to her with cruel force.

“That's as much as wishing you had no husband.” She was right. But for her fortune, Derek would never have married her. “Because he could not,” suggested his advocate, her heart. “And he certainly loved you at first,” added memory, holding up a mirror of the past. Had that past gone by forever? No. It could not be.

To-day, it was impossible for him to leave home, and so he had time for second thoughts. She would leave him to them. She would not intrude upon him. She would try to make

everything nice and satisfactory, and she would not shed a tear. No. She dared not disfigure herself. Would this desperate need for keeping up appearances exist if there was true love on both sides? No, certainly not. Then could she count this failure as an error for which she might hold her husband responsible? "Is human love the growth of human will?" Alas! it was a terrible misfortune, yet possibly the fault of neither. If Derek left her, it would be proof positive that he had ceased to love her; but she dared not think of this just now. For the present she must help him to put a good face on things, and pray that he might relent. She would avoid meeting him until in the presence of their guests.

"Is Captain Rivers in the house?" she asked the servant who brought in tea.

"Captain Rivers is in his own room, 'm," was the reply. "He has just rung for Hicks, 'm." (Hicks was his valet.)

"Ah! he is packing up," thought Celia; and she went upstairs, hoping to quiet her nerves alone, and resolved to do all she could by tact and gentleness to win him back without an explanation. That would inevitably lead to further quarrels.

What terrible hours those were while she went over and over again the scene with her husband and fought against the dreadful fear that the wounds they had given each other would be hard to heal!

* * * * *

When her guests arrived, Celia was dressed and in the drawing-room. She had put on a gown of pale sea-green gauze and silver lace, which suited her.

Rivers managed to come into the room at the same moment, and his wife thought with a pang how well and distinguished he looked; how dear he was to her, even while she deeply resented his indifference and want of sympathy. It was a tremendous effort to put on an air of gaiety and light-heartedness, while the misery of her anticipations made her slight

frame quiver till the diamonds which fastened the lace on her bodice glittered even more than usual with the quick motion of the acting heart that beat so restlessly beneath them.

She succeeded, however, in preserving her usual manner and aspect. She was very civil to Lady Phipps, who was quite caressing to her young hostess, and loudly expressed her regret at leaving the delightful country, without extracting any invitation to prolong her stay by a visit to the Grange.

The talk at table was abundant and smart, Mrs. Dykes being well supplied with town and country gossip, and the way of turning phrases which with many passes for wit, while her husband was ever ready to lead the chorus of applause with a noisy laugh.

Rivers, who was daily drifting farther from a real understanding of his wife, thought that the unbroken front she preserved was due to the babyish, trivial nature with which he chose to credit her, and that she fancied he would forget the bitterness of their altercation that afternoon as soon as she did, and that a few kisses and perhaps a present would make all right between them, while, as she talked brightly, almost coquettishly to Riversdale across the table, Celia said to herself, "Has he no idea of what I suffer?"

In such a party, sport was sure to be one of the chief topics; one, too, that Mrs. Dykes was quite competent to discuss, for she was a bold and experienced horsewoman, and, in reply to a question from her, Rivers said:

"I don't think this is a really good hunting country. It is better for shooting, and that is remarkably tame. I have nearly had enough of it. In short, I have serious thoughts of joining my regiment before my leave is quite expired. Nothing in this country can equal the excitement of real big game in India."

"So I imagine. I should like to have a shot at a tiger myself," said Mrs. Dykes.

"What! are you thinking of India for this winter? What

do *you* say to that?" cried Riversdale, looking over to Celia.

Rivers listened for her reply with some curiosity. She smiled and paused an instant. "I like the idea very much," she returned; "for, of course, I will join Derek, though I may not go out at first."

"It would be great fun," exclaimed Mrs. Dykes.

"You would have a real good time," added Lady Phipps. "I love India. I remember thinking how dreary and dull England was when first I came back."

"But then you were the 'allegro,' the spirit of joy in the stations which were so fortunate as to claim you," said Rivers, admiringly.

"Well, I am surprised," resumed Riversdale, "after making this house so charming and comfortable."

"It will be still more charming when we come back in early spring, and I am afraid we are a pair of nomads. We love wandering," said Celia.

"I think India a horrid hole," said Sir Thomas, drawing a tiny box from his waistcoat-pocket and surreptitiously swallowing a dinner-pill. "No liver can stand the beastly climate."

"It never hurt me," said Lady Phipps, in a sweet tone.

"That is evident," returned Rivers, recovering the amazement with which he had listened to his wife's speech. "What does she mean?" he asked himself. "Does she mean to facilitate our parting? Or does she really mean to stick to a man who doesn't want her? I fancy she has too much spirit for that. At all events, she has her money to console her."

While he thought, the ladies left the room. During the period of seclusion they talked of India. Celia seemed to listen with profound attention to Lady Phipps's reminiscences of that country, while she thought, "How cruel and unfeeling he is! This is his scheme of deserting me, and to proclaim it at a moment when I could not remonstrate or plead with

him. No. He has ceased to care for me. Nothing can keep him. I will let him go."

"Your description makes me long to start at once," she said aloud, at the first pause in her interlocutor's eloquence. "Derek has often spoken of his life in India, but he has never succeeded in making it seem so tempting."

Here they were interrupted by the advent of the gentlemen, and presently Lord Riversdale came over to where his hostess sat a little apart. He looked steadily at her. "Are you all right, Celia?" he asked, in a low voice. "You haven't a vestige of colour, and you are trembling all over. What's the matter? You might tell *me*!"

"I am nervous at the idea of a long sea voyage," she said, with a peculiar smile.

"Then do not undertake it. You stay at home, and then Derek will stay at home, too."

Celia did not reply. She did not dare to speak. She feared that Riversdale would see how her lip trembled. His face grew grave and sympathetic.

"I'll take my people off," he said. "You look dreadfully tired. You ought to go to bed. The carriages are here."

"Oh, no! do not hurry away. I am not tired, I assure you."

"Tired or not, you are not yourself. If by any chance you want—— But, no! you can want nothing. Then Mary will come back next week."

"You are very good. You always are," said Celia, feeling that her eyes were moist. "But, indeed, Riversdale, I do not need any advice, any help."

"Well, no. Only try and keep Derek at home."

She shook her head, and turned to speak to one of the men Riversdale had brought.

At last the guests were gone, and she was left with Preston and her husband.

"I must say good-bye to-night, Mrs. Rivers," said the

former, coming to sit beside her. "I am going to make a very early start to-morrow, and must not think of disturbing you at such an hour. My best thanks for the delightful time you have given me. I hope to see you early next spring in town."

"Oh! you must come and see us before that," exclaimed Celia, finding a sort of comfort in speaking as if there was no chance of the dreadful break-up she anticipated.

"If you go off to India, the Grange will be indeed empty."

"Ah! we are not gone yet," she cried, with a painful attempt to smile.

Here Rivers came in, and, walking to the fireplace, stood on the rug for a moment in silence.

"Mr. Preston is going away ever so early to-morrow, Derek," said his wife, glad to be able to call him by his name once more, and watching his face as she spoke.

Rivers turned away from her, and, addressing Preston, remarked:

"I'll take advantage of your company as far as C——, where you will go north."

"But, my dear fellow, I have just been telling Mrs. Rivers I must say good-bye to-night, as I want to catch the eight o'clock express at Berkhampton: that means starting at 7.15. You won't be ready at that unholy hour?"

"Yes, I shall; but, as you say, it is not necessary to disturb Mrs. Rivers. Come along, and let us have a cigar before we turn in," and he went to the door.

"Well, good-bye, Mrs. Rivers," said Preston, rising and holding out his hand.

Celia stood up. "*Au revoir!*" she said; "not good-bye. It is a word I hate."

They shook hands cordially, and Preston went out of the room, Rivers holding the door open.

As soon as he had passed through, Celia made a step forward, and said, in a low but distinct tone:

“Derek!”

He turned towards her and said, coldly, “Did you speak?”

“I did!” she exclaimed, her eyes lighting up with a flash of indignation. “But you need not listen, if you do not like.”

Rivers hesitated an instant and followed his guest, closing the door after him.

CHAPTER XIV.

It was in some degree a relief to be alone and in the dark. Yet what a terrible night it was! The passion of grief, of fear, of indignation, shook Celia's very soul. She was too tempest-tossed for tears. She could hear her heart beat, while her pulse throbbed feverishly.

How cruel Derek was! How blind and unsympathetic! How was it he could not see that he had been inconsiderate and trying? Was *all* the forbearance, all the watchful care not to offend, to be on her side? Yet, if he would say the least word of apology, of regret for his overbearing temper, how readily she would forgive. How her heart ached for his love, for the caressing tenderness he showed her in the first happy days of their union! Why had he changed? Did men always change?

Then a storm of wild contempt for herself swept over her. Why did she forget all self-respect, all consciousness of what was due to her in this mad longing for her husband's affection when she knew she deserved it; that she really lived only to please him. Yes, it *was* contemptible weakness, and probably Derek despised her for it. Yet she could not help this passionate longing to be reconciled to him.

Gradually the turmoil of her thoughts subsided, and she began to look more rationally at the state of affairs. What was best to be done? What ought she to do? Her still excited brain strove hard to disentangle the dreadful coil of

wrong and misery which enfolded her. She would *not* give up hope. She would *not* succumb without a struggle. First, and before everything, thought Celia, she must prevent gossip, and try to make up with Derek without anyone's help, anyone's knowledge of their grave dissension. What an awful disgrace it would be if she were deserted by her husband in their first year of married life! "People would think there must be something horrid about me. I must try and blind the servants first. They see and know so much. I will not stay here. I will go to Aunt Sarah. She is ill, poor dear; that will be an excuse. Then I will write to Derek. I will not go and see him. I might make such a fool of myself. I know I should, and end in an awful fit of crying. I dare not see him. But I can write calmly and put things before him. And, oh! I must not cry and look like a wretched, wandering ghost. I shall be obliged to tell Aunt Sarah, but not yet awhile. I will never let any one know that Derek goes away against my will. I will *not* be pitied. Oh, Father who art in heaven, help me, guide me, for I am in sore distress!"

A flood of bitter tears could no longer be resisted, and, utterly exhausted, Celia passed into oblivion for a couple of hours, till the movement of the household and the first gleams of morning light woke her to a fresh, keen sense of wretchedness and dread. The sound of feet going to and fro kept her watchful and palpitating. The light grew stronger. She rose and raised the blind. It was a crisp, bright morning, a faint filmy haze hanging over the woods and slightly obscuring the distant landscape. Was it possible that Derek would leave her without a word of farewell? No, it could not be; and if he did come to say good-bye, she would hold him with the tender strength of her love till for very shame *he* could not, would not unclasp her arms. Ah! if he would but come!

She returned to bed, hoping she knew not what. The sounds increased. How she prayed that her maid would not come to rouse her yet, till she had recovered somewhat from her

intense weeping in the night. Then she heard the crunching of the gravel as the dog-cart came to the door, and then Derek's voice, calling out some order as he stood beneath his wife's window, which looked out over the entrance. A scrambling of horses' feet followed, and the dog-cart drove off rapidly, the sound swiftly dying away.

"What will become of me!" thought Celia, pressing her hands over her ears to shut out the sounds of despair. He was gone; perhaps forever! "There—there is Francks's dreaded knock. I will not answer."

The door opened softly and the lady's maid came in.

"Is that you, Francks?" said Celia, sleepily. "I will not get up yet. Captain Rivers disturbed me, and I should like a little more sleep."

"Shall I bring your breakfast at nine, 'm?"

"Yes, please," said her mistress, in the same sleepy tone. "Is it fine?"

"Yes, 'm; a beautiful morning;" whereupon Francks retired to inform the valet that he was quite mistaken; there had been no quarrel between her lady and the master, for he had gone in to say good-bye, and so Mrs. Rivers was just having a second sleep. Whereat Mr. Hicks shook his head and remarked that to his mind things looked a little queer.

When Celia had taken her tea and toast and performed the first half of her toilette she felt she might afront the scrutiny of her attendant.

Her cheeks were very white, but her eyes no longer told of long hours of weeping, and she could keep her voice steady.

"Have they lit the fire in my room?" asked Celia.

"No, 'm. The sun is quite bright."

"No matter. I want the fire, too," and she sat down to submit her abundant locks to the maid's manipulation.

"You must pack up my things and your own," exclaimed Celia, suddenly. "I have promised to go up to town to-morrow, in any case, now I hear that Mrs. Twiss is very

unwell. I shall therefore go to her in the first place. We may be a month in town or more, and I may possibly go abroad for the winter. I shall settle all that soon. So you will know what to take."

"Yes, 'm," returned Francks, her face brightening. She liked her young mistress, and earnestly hoped there was no truth in the valet's forebodings, besides desiring to prove his conclusions wrong. "The autumn grows dreary in the country."

"Do you think so? I am so fond of autumn. I have quantities to write this morning, and after luncheon I want you to drive with me into the town. I want to leave that parcel of work, the pictures and things, at the rectory. I am afraid I cannot be here for the bazaar on the 20th, so I may as well give my contribution at once."

Thus primed, Francks descended triumphantly to demolish all Mr. Hicks's evil theories.

Celia spent a busy morning. Besides her letter-writing, she regulated some papers and girlish treasures, not many. As yet her heart and character were an "unexplored country," like the old maps of Africa,—a great blank space in the middle, with a faintly coloured border, sparsely dotted by villages and rude seaports, while noble streams swelled from hidden sources ready to carry untold wealth on their generous floods, or to give ingress to the stranger who seeks with courage and skill to enter in. Later, this undiscovered land will yield the riches of its gold and gems, its ivory and precious spice, to the hand that struck, the feet that trampled, for

". . . the heart is like the grape,
And to the sun's caress
Yields not the sweetness nor the strength
That's crushed out in the press."

* * * * * * *

The desperate desire to hide her wounds gave Celia strength and invention. The intuition of sensitive pride suggested

little touches which shook even the unbelief of Hicks. As she went to her room after luncheon, Celia met the valet carrying a pile of clothes into his master's bedroom, where he was packing.

"I would not take all Captain Rivers's warm things, Hicks, if I were you," she said, with a pleasant smile. "He will want plenty of light clothes, especially later on."

"Just so, ma'am. I ventured to say as much to Captain Rivers, but he only repeated his orders to pack up *every* thing."

"Well, I suppose he knows best what he wants," returned Celia, giving him a little nod as she passed on with a cheery aspect.

"I'm blowed if I don't think I've made a mistake," mused Hicks when she left him, and he threw a number of garments on the bed. "If the captain and she had fallen out very bad, the missis would be in hysterics at least, and Mrs. Rouse, to say nothing of Miss Francks, would be blackguarding the captain high up and low down. Now, he isn't a bad fellow, by no means. He is a lot better than the most of them, and a real gentleman, though he *is* a trifle 'igh and 'aughty; but he is just a bit too hard for such a soft little kitten as his wife, and she would do better if she cared less for him, not but that he is fond of her. He was real mad about her for a bit, but there's a change in him. Law! what changes *I've* seen in my time. Now, that's a thing women can't abide, and in spite of songs about the 'fickle sex' and the 'charm of a new lover,' the women are *not* so changeable by long chalks. No; that they ain't."

With an air of conviction he knelt down to resume his packing.

His words had cut into Celia's soul. "He repeated his orders to pack up everything." Then Derek had *certainly* made up his mind yesterday to leave her. How cruel and unjust! He did not deserve that she should tear her heart

about him as she was doing. Why could she not let him go, and find consolation in the amusements, the variety, the society she could command! Ah! no; nothing could amuse, nothing console her, but reconciliation with the husband on whom she had lavished the first love of her girlhood, who had roused the first glow of woman's passion in her somewhat slowly developing nature.

As soon as luncheon and Francks's dinner were over, Celia with her maid started in her pretty pony carriage. Never before had she driven with so much courage and skill. The small but by no means young groom behind was quite struck by his mistress's sudden advance in jehuship; even her personal timidity seemed swallowed up in the all-absorbing misery into which she had been plunged; still, she maintained a brave face and talked at intervals to her companion collectedly and quietly.

To Celia's great relief, the rectoress of Berkhampton was out. She therefore left her parcel and the note with which she had provided herself. Then she drove round by the Court and enquired for the absent family. What ages it seemed since Lady Mary went away with the little invalid Maud. This *détour* brought her home in time for her semblance of a dinner. This despatched, she threw herself into a large chair, and wondered what was to become of her. It was only eight o'clock. She could not go to bed yet. Her eyes strayed to her writing-table. She found it impossible to resist the temptation. The next moment she was writing with a fluent pen, pouring out her heart to Derek as she never could do in his presence, at least when he listened with a cold, displeased countenance. But when she read it, it seemed too abjectly craving for his love, his pity, even his endurance. No; that was not the tone in which she ought to address him; so she hastily tore up her lucubrations and began again, only again to destroy. Finally, when it was quite time to go to bed, she was obliged to rest satisfied with

these few lines, which she addressed and stamped ready to post as soon as she reached town next day:

"I am going to town, to-morrow. I shall be with Mrs. Twiss. Are you really going away? Would it not be wiser and more just to speak with me first? I shall be at home every day and all day. Your attached wife.—C."

"That will do as well as anything else," she thought, with a heavy sigh. "I fear that to some offences Derek is unforgiving, implacable, but he *is* unjust. Will he ever acknowledge it, even to himself? If he did, he would soon say so. There is nothing mean or petty about Derek."

The journey to town was less trying than Celia expected. Action is always a relief, and she could not turn a deaf ear to the whisperings of hope. Derek would accept her invitation or permission to call, and in a personal interview she could do much.

As Celia and her maid drew near London, the former broke a long silence by asking, "Did you not say something a little while ago about going to see your sister and her children?"

"Yes, 'm. I did mention it, but I would not think of asking for a holiday, 'm, at a time when you were unsettled."

"I think this is a very good time for you to take a holiday," returned her mistress. "My aunt's maid has known me ever so long, and can do all I want. While I am in town I shall be in her house. You had better go down to your sister this afternoon. She lives in Kent, doesn't she? I should just have some dinner and start by some train at four or five o'clock. Telegraph to say you are coming, and here—here is a little present to pay your journey." Celia drew a note from her *porte-monnaie* and handed it to her maid.

"I'm sure, 'm, I am most thankful for your great kindness," she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with pleasure. "But, indeed, I should be sorry to ill-convenience you. I could take my holiday at any time, 'm."

"No time could be more convenient than the present, Francks. I shall be here for some little time, and, as I said, my aunt's maid can do all I want, so if I were you I should start this afternoon, and not go to the trouble of unpacking anything till you get to your sister's house."

Francks gratefully accepted this suggestion, and little more passed between "mistress and maid" till they reached Paddington, where Celia found her aunt's brougham waiting for her, on her way to which she put her note to Rivers in the station letter-box unnoticed.

"Mrs. Twiss is very poorly to-day, 'm," said the staid "man out of livery," who opened the door, in reply to Celia's enquiry. "She had a very bad night, 'm, and I *am* glad you've come, ma'am."

"Aunt Sarah" was sitting in the smaller of her two drawing-rooms beside a huge fire, the door being guarded by a thick curtain and the atmosphere stifling; though the weather was warm for the season, a loose, warm wrapper was supplemented by a large red woollen shawl, and she had a flushed, feverish look.

"Well, Celia, my love, you are a good girl to come and look after your poor old auntie," she exclaimed, holding out her arms to her niece. "How did you get away from that husband of yours?"

"Oh! there was no difficulty about that. Of course, he knows I would come to you if you were ill," returned Celia, kissing her. "And are you not better?"

"Better! No, I am not, and never will be; that is my belief. My *constitootion*" (as she pronounced that word) "is breaking up; my liver is all wrong. I caught a chill in Paris, a chill of the liver, and I haven't the strength to stand against it, as Dr. Barker remarked. I was never really strong, and much anxiety and worry *and*, I must say, disappointment have undermined my health."

"But, auntie dear, I don't think you have had so much to

try you, and as to disappointment, who has disappointed you? Not me, I hope."

"No, not you, dearie," still holding her hand and stroking it, "but some one very near you. Never mind, that can't be helped; you don't look the thing yourself. You look like a ghost; no, not *now*. I don't like to see you flush up so quick; looks as if your heart was not quite right."

"Perhaps not," said Celia, with a sad little smile.

"Well, dear, I am going to see Sir Amyas Carver. He is the great man for the heart, and you must see him, too. Now you must have your lunch. And ring the bell, dear. Watts shall give you some of my '54 port to strengthen you up a bit; you do look bad. How did you leave the captain?"

"Oh! remarkably well," returned Celia, anxious to draw her away from this dangerous subject.

"I'm glad you insisted on coming to me."

"I assure you Derek did not attempt to prevent me."

Here the servant appeared.

"Don't hold the door like that, Watts! Draughts and cold air are fatal to me; shut it close. You must open a bottle of '54 port for Mrs. Rivers, and keep it for her. She needs building up."

"Yes, 'm."

"Is luncheon ready?"

"Quite ready, 'm."

"Then go down and try to eat. You'll excuse me; I daren't venture to the dining-room in a northeast wind, and yet, would you believe it, Celia, I am burning!"

"I think you have too large a fire, Aunt Sarah."

"No, my dear! Barker says I am to avoid cold; indeed, he will not answer for the consequences if I take another chill on the liver."

"Of course you must not come down. I shall not be long," and Celia went away to the big, bare dining-room duly furnished and decorated with a thick Turkey carpet and

heavy leather-covered chairs, a funereal sideboard, and regulation bronzes, but not the smallest touch of individuality.

"I suppose you have dined, Watts?" said Celia, as the "right-hand" man poured out with delicate care a glass of what Aunt Sarah considered a life-giving beverage.

"Yes, 'm; quite half an hour ago."

"Then pray ask Gage to come to me." (Gage was Aunt Sarah's maid.)

"Certainly, 'm. When you have finished luncheon, 'm?"

"No, now."

Gage soon made her appearance wreathed in smiles. She had known Mrs. Rivers as Miss Raynor, and was attached to her; in fact, Mrs. Twiss had never kept a maid so long before. Being the one servant most brought in contact with her, she quarrelled with the holders of this important office more than with any other member of her household.

"Ah, Gage! I hope you are quite well."

"Yes, thank you, 'm, as I hope you are, though I'm sorry to see you looking so poorly. I hope you are not feeling unwell?"

"Oh, no; there is nothing whatever the matter with me. I want to know if you can attend to me, for I wish to give Francks a holiday. I will not give you much trouble. I——"

"Oh, dear, no; *that* you never did, 'm. I shall be delighted to dress you again, Mrs. Rivers, 'm."

"Thank you, Gage. Will you see that Francks has some dinner? She wants to leave by an afternoon train."

"She has dined, 'm. She was just showing me where to find your things, and will bring you the key of the cabinet where she put your jewels when she comes to take leave of you. You have your old rooms, m."

"Thank you, Gage. I must go back to my aunt now. She looks far from well."

"And so she *is*, 'm, thanks to mismanagement, as I'll explain to you when you can give me quarter of an hour."

CHAPTER XV.

CELIA was not a little surprised at herself for her inclination to fall on Francks's neck and weep when she came to bid her good-bye. It seemed as if it were the forerunner of a complete break-up of her newly-organised household. She readily attached herself to anyone who was kind and sympathetic, and she had grown fond of Francks, who had been with her all through those happy honeymoon days, which seemed to have rolled away such ages back.

Fortunately, Mrs. Twiss was so eager to detail every minute particular of her indisposition at Paris, the various remedies tried, and the failure of all to give relief, that her niece had only to listen. As yet she was safe, but the time would soon come when she would need all her strength, all her ingenuity, to guard her secret. How long would it remain a secret once Aunt Sarah's suspicions were roused?

Before it was bedtime Celia was broken with fatigue, and as soon as Mrs. Twiss retired her niece followed her example; sleep mercifully wrapt her in his soft embrace, and gave her some respite from the torture of hope and fear.

She was thankful to find it broad daylight when she woke. The welcome repose had strengthened her sufficiently to give hope a foothold.

Perhaps Derek, having had time to think, might at once repent and forgive; perhaps he might come that very morning to see her, and then all difficulties would be swept away. Even then, could they ever be quite the same to each other after this cruel quarrel?

However, the day dragged through, and no letter reached her. Mrs. Twiss recapitulated all her symptoms and enlarged on the devotion of Mrs. Colonel Heavysides. Then that lady called in person to ascertain her friend's condition.

This was a dreadful interlude. Mrs. Twiss introduced her in the most impressive manner to her niece, and Celia was obliged to sit all through the visit, wondering why all beholders did not see "deserted wife" stamped upon her brow.

It was not till just before dinner by the seven o'clock delivery that Celia, who was in her own room, received the anxiously expected reply from her husband. It was almost as brief as her own letter :

"I was absent for a day, so did not receive yours till this morning. I do not see that any good can come of an interview between us. We are unfortunately too widely different in character, tastes, and associations to permit of real companionship, and your repetition of what I have already told you I considered an insult proves that you have little regard for my feelings. In time you may be able to break your chains. With *me* you could never be happy.

"DEREK RIVERS."

Was it, then, all over? Would he be always implacable? Could such a tragedy result from a few hasty, thoughtless words?

Then Derek cared very little for her if he caught so eagerly at an excuse for leaving her. Let him go, then. She would not humbly beg the favour of his companionship. She had done nothing deserving such cruel treatment. She would *not* ask him again. How could she ever be happy with him? Better endure the agony of this terrible wrench and the fiery cure of her wounds even by searing with the hot irons of contemptuous curiosity and pity. The doubt and scandal, the awful loneliness, the sense that she could not win love, all these would be easier than the torture long drawn out of living under the same roof with him and seeing him daily drifting farther and farther away from her. "Yes, I will let him go. Already I noticed a change in him. Yet at first he *did*

love me. Why did he change?" She stood up, stretching out her arms, murmuring, "And I love you more than I did. I am angry. I wish to punish you, Derek; but under it all I love you and hunger for a sight of you, my husband!" Then, as she sank into her chair again and the door opened, she exclaimed, in a different tone:

"Is that you, Gage? I did not know it was so late."

"Mrs. Twiss says, if you please, ma'am, Dr. Barker finds her so much better that she may dine down-stairs to-day."

"I am sure she may, Gage. She has been quite too much in one room. Don't you think so?"

"Ma'am," said Gage, solemnly, "she ought never to have been coddled up and stuffed and crammed till she is so bilious her eyes are like boiled gooseberries, and Mrs. Colonel Heavysides is that greedy she just coaxes my mistress to eat that she may get it herself. It may be I'm taking a liberty, but I don't believe there's any end to that woman's deception. She is no lady."

"Well, Gage, I know nothing about her; she is not attractive. But I had better dress. Give me something black."

She felt as if she were two people,—one who understood and was alive to all the commonplace routine of everyday life and one who was wandering away hovering round her disfigured god, moaning, hopeless, absolutely indifferent to life and all it offered.

Second only to her despair at losing Derek was her dread of the moment when she would be forced to tell her tale to Aunt Sarah. How she would triumph in her own superior penetration; how she would revile Rivers; how she would reproach Celia herself with her folly and weakness.

With these ideas playing over the deeper gloom of the despair at the back of her mind, Celia descended to the drawing-room, determined to interest and amuse her aunt and so divert her from awkward inquiries.

"Come along, Celia," cried Mrs. Twiss, as her niece entered. "I declare, it is quite like the old days, having you under my roof and dining alone with me. It makes me better than all the physic I have taken."

"Very glad to hear it, auntie dear. Suppose you throw physic to the dogs; try a course of my society."

"Ah! you'll not be left long with me; you have such a mob of Riverses round you."

Here dinner was announced, and Aunt Sarah took Celia's arm.

"You must come out and drive with me to-morrow. You have been shut up too long, and I should like you to consult Sir Amyas Carver. I do not think Dr. Barker quite understands your case."

"He is a very clever man, I can tell you. None of your starving, abstemious fanatics that undermine one's strength."

"Well, do have another opinion."

"If you wish it, my dear, I will. You don't look at all well yourself, child. Have you had a cold? That house of yours is a damp, dreary hole, enough to give anyone the blues."

"You must not talk treason, auntie. I think it a terrestrial paradise. I prefer it to any place I ever was in."

"Ah, well, you are easily pleased. To my mind, the best thing about it is the nearness of Riversdale. Lord Riversdale is the flower of Rivers's flock,—a nice, jolly, outspoken fellow. Ah, my dear. But there's no use in talking."

"No, not the least," said Celia, laughing, and shuddering at her own laughter. Then she asked some question respecting Mrs. Colonel Heavysides which directed Aunt Sarah's conversation into a new channel. When they returned to the drawing-room and had partaken of coffee, Mrs. Twiss declared herself by no means the worse for having gone downstairs, and Celia, glancing at the clock, saw that she had still

about an hour and a half to keep up appearances, when her hostess suddenly burst out with—

“How is that high and mighty husband of yours? You have hardly mentioned him.”

“Oh, he is quite well, and has enjoyed the autumn very much, though the sport in England is rather too tame for him,” continued Celia, thinking it a good chance to broach the subject and prepare her aunt’s mind for future disclosures.

“*Tame!*” repeated that inexperienced personage. “Does he shoot the chickabidies in the farm-yards, then?”

“Oh, no; but he likes shooting lions and tigers and that sort of thing.”

“Why, bless me, does he consider this outlandish sort of game the correct thing for a married man? His life belongs to you, not to himself. There’s nothing on earth so selfish as a fine gentleman.”

“You don’t quite understand Derek, auntie. He is so very fond of sport. Most of the men I meet now are, and Derek would like very much to go to India to shoot big game. I would not oppose——”

“Go to India! Leave that pretty house now you have spent a heap of money on it!” almost shrieked Mrs. Twiss. “Why the man is clean out of his mind! and what are you to do? to go trapesing in the scorching heat and dust among noxious beasts and blacks and alligators, and the Lord knows what?”

“I don’t suppose I should go out there at first; but if the regiment remains longer, which is not at all unlikely, I could join him.”

Mrs. Twiss gazed at her niece, her mouth slightly open.

“Not go out with him! I see,” she exclaimed, sternly. “Then what hussey is he going to take? for, mark my words, he is not going alone.”

"My dear Aunt Sarah," said Celia, colouring with a sudden sense of shame; "I don't suppose for a moment that such an idea ever occurred to Derek."

"Then, my dear, you are a born fool. I have no patience to listen to you. But there, it's all turning out as *I* expected. He'll take your money, neglect you, and spend it all on other women. I never could stand his airs. He hasn't as much heart as—as would stick on the point of a needle."

"I am sorry you think so; but, auntie, you must not say these things to me. The whole project is uncertain, and I only mention it to *you*. It may never come off."

"If you have one grain of spirit you would put your foot down and say, 'None of your games for me.' Set a beggar on horseback. I'd like to know what going into that queer, old-fashioned place cost you. Why, you've been pouring out money like water. You are a complete fool about that man. I thank God your capital has been tied up pretty tight. How is that repelling, contemptuous, sneering husband of yours to go shooting lions and tigers and hippopotamuses on the five or six hundred a year you gave him! It is not to be done."

"And I am quite sure if Derek cannot do it on his own funds he will remain in England. My dear aunt, I want to stay with you for a while and be happy with you, but I cannot listen to you if you abuse my husband."

"All I beg is that you will not make a gibbering idiot of yourself, and, whatever you do, keep a tight hold of your husband. If you let him go roaming about with those unprincipled, rackety companions of his, he'll go to the dogs and ruin you."

"But, Aunt Sarah, his companions are such quiet, well-bred men. They only ask to be out all day and tire themselves to death. I am sure my guardian, Mr. Ridley's son, and the young men we used to meet at their house, were twice as rackety as Derek or Riversdale. Do you remember how

loud they used to laugh at jokes we did not understand ; and what a noise they used to make !”

“Oh, yes, that was just natural, youthful spirits. They were not conceited, haughty, upsetting jackanapes.”

“I can’t say I remember them very distinctly. At any rate, aunt, do not let us quarrel about anything. I used always to be happy with you, and I should like to live peaceably with you now.”

“I’m sure it will not be my fault if you don’t. So please read me the evening paper ; there is a continuation of that curious divorce case. *That* will show the true character of your high-bred gentlemen.”

Celia gladly complied. She could read mechanically, and, at least, her aunt did not talk.

So the time wore away, and once again she was in the dark and alone.

The next morning was warm and sunny. Mrs. Twiss therefore allowed herself to be persuaded into taking a drive around the deserted park, which she enjoyed very much. Celia accompanied her, and did her best to occupy herself with her rather exacting relative,—anything to gain a respite from her haunting thoughts,—till she could endure the suppression no longer, and, on the announcement of “Mrs. Colonel Heavysides,” she beat a masterly retreat through the conservatory unperceived, and, shutting herself into her own room, told Gage she did not want any tea, only to be quiet, as her head ached.

Then she gave herself up to the ever-recurring questions, “What shall I do?” “What ought I to do?” “What is my duty?”

Her strong inclination was to let her husband go in proud, indignant silence, without an effort to recall her reluctant mate. But Celia had a conscience. She felt she ought to do something to open her husband’s eyes to the injustice of his conduct, to the injury he would do himself in the opinion of

his world, of society. It cost her a hard struggle to bring her mind down to write another letter to Derek. She would do it, and anything would be better than calling in Riversdale or Lady Mary or, above all, her own guardian, who disapproved her marriage, to interfere between Rivers and herself. If he would not return for *her* asking, she began to think she would rather he kept away. The painful conviction was growing on her that even if Rivers repented of his hardness their lives would not be what she once anticipated. Though she still loved him, something she could not clearly define had already evaporated from the devotion she felt for him. Would it ever return? Her nature, in spite of its softness, was interwoven with a woof of sterner stuff, and she never could be any man's slave, much as she might admire or respect him. For two days she battled with herself, and at length determined to address Derek once more. The third she tried to write, but could not please herself; on the fourth she hastily penned the following and despatched it. It did not express half she felt; but for the present she felt utterly inarticulate and worn out with her mental struggle.

“I write to you once more, Derek, though you may not care to hear from me. You have, perhaps, ceased to love me. I think you have; that is my misfortune; but, perhaps, you cannot help it. If so, I have no right to complain, and it becomes a bitter mortification for me to repeat my prayer for your return. We have, however, undertaken certain obligations towards each other, which cannot lightly be thrown aside, and as your wife, the one most closely bound to you in all the world, I must for duty's sake ask you to give some consideration to what I urge. Men generally get the best in such an unhappy quarrel as ours, yet I think if you persist in leaving me you will harm yourself more than me. Why can you not forgive my hasty, intemperate speech and give your thoughts to making a career? This would take your thoughts

from the disappointment your home seems to have been. I do not wish you to affect a love you do not feel, yet you might live tolerantly with me; nor, believe me, would I trouble you with tokens of affection you do not value, but I bear your name, and I should be interested in whatever you undertook, and watch your career (for I am sure it will be successful) with pride. I have been weakly fond of you, yet I begin to feel that the bitter cup you have given me to drink may be more strengthening than the honey-sweet caresses you used to lavish on me. I daresay my undisciplined nature, my unformed manners annoyed you. But, Derek, I am very young to be forsaken and left to guide myself. Do not imagine I want to rouse your pity. I would disdain to play upon your feelings, and, deeply as your change has wounded me, I think I shall survive it and make a life for myself beyond this cruel trial. I write as much in your interest as my own. If you refuse to return to me, so be it. I shall not ask again.

“Your true wife,

“CELIA RIVERS.”

CHAPTER XVI.

It was a joyful return home for Damer and his wife. Their precious little girl had been almost cured of her distressing cough, which had not been very severe, and they looked forward to a peaceful winter with deep content. Time never hung heavy on their hands; the duties and pleasures of country supplied ample interest and occupation.

A month had passed since Lady Mary had taken her invalid to the sea, and, from the day Damer had bid Mrs. Rivers good-bye previous to his departure for Torquay, they had heard nothing of Derek and his wife beyond a report that they had both gone up to town.

“I have a long letter from Preston,” said Damer, as Lady

Mary came into his study after the arrival of the mid-day post a few days after their return home. "He is studying some out-of-the-way, ancient buildings in the south of France. I don't quite like what he says about Derek. There, read it."

Lady Mary took the missive, quickly skimming the pages till she came to the last paragraph, "Your cousin, Captain Rivers, started for India the day before I left London. I must say he is a curious fellow to leave his wife of barely a year, and such a taking woman, for the sake of any game, big or little. I am told he has General Stopford, who used to be his colonel, for a fellow-passenger. Mrs. Rivers has remained with her aunt, who has, I hear, been seriously ill. I suppose she (Mrs. Rivers) will join her husband, or he will only have a brief expedition and return to her. There is already, as you may imagine, some ill-natured gossip afloat respecting our friends; probably you know all this better than I do, but I thought I might mention it." Kind messages followed.

Lady Mary laid down the letter and stood silent for an instant, her hand on the back of her husband's chair. Then she said, slowly:

"No, I do not like it at all. It is not like Derek, either. I used not to think him selfish for a man."

"Have we the monopoly of that unamiable quality?" asked Damer, leaning back to look up into his wife's eyes.

"Well, yes. Men must have some or they would not be fit for their work in life. *You* have not enough. But I don't understand this report. Derek was often impatient with Celia, but he was fond of her, too. Though he is generally what is called a 'fine fellow' and a 'good fellow,' I am not sure he is the stuff of which a good husband is made. He does not understand or sympathise with women, and he is the very last man who, penniless himself, ought to have married a wealthy wife or so young a girl as Celia. Her youth puts her at his mercy. One cannot tell how she may develop. If Derek neglects her, it will have a very bad effect on her

character. She is outspoken and quick, so may offend him. My cousin is a typical man. He has a large leaven of the animal, with the strength and weakness which it brings, yet his heart is by no means hard. His sense of honour is keen. If Celia were poor and dependent on him he would stick to her even if she offended him bitterly. As it is——” She took up the letter again and reread the passage that troubled her. “It may be all right, but I am surprised Derek did not write to *me* or to you. I wonder if he spoke to Riversdale. Where *is* Riversdale !”

“I fancy at old Grantley’s.”

“I will write to Celia by this post. A few inquiries may throw some light on the matter. You see, Mr. Preston says he has absolutely sailed. It looks very bad. If Derek has gone against her will, he’ll break his wife’s heart—or harden it.”

Damer remained in silent thought and Lady Mary sat down to write. Presently she paused. “Shall I say I have heard Derek has gone to India?”

“Yes, I would, if I were you ; but make no comment ;” and his wife wrote on.

She was deeply concerned by the glimpse of unfriendly relations between her kinsman and his wife, and greatly feared it might be the beginning of serious trouble. If Derek took the bit between his teeth, it might be difficult to stop his downward course. If Celia were ill, dangerously ill, in consequence of his neglect, he would come back to her fast enough. But she is so healthy, so thoroughly free from nerves or physical weakness, that, even if her heart breaks, it will scarce make any outer show ; it will brokenly live on.

Lady Mary calculated that she ought to have a reply within the next three days at farthest, and waited anxiously ; but several more passed, and still Celia gave no sign.

It was nearly a week since Lady Mary had despatched her letter, when, one damp, drizzling day, as she was dressing for dinner, she heard a carriage drive up, and, on entering the

drawing-room, found her brother standing on the hearth-rug in grave conversation with Mr. Damer.

"Ah, Riversdale, I am delighted to see you. When did you return?"

"Just in time to dress and come on here. I want to take counsel with you and Damer."

"I fancy I know why," said Lady Mary. "But let us wait till dinner is over. This discussion must be in camera."

"Exactly. Now tell me, how is the daughter of our house and heart?" asked Riversdale, who was fond of his sister's children. "Won't you have them down?"

"I cannot, I am sorry to say. Maud is not yet allowed to sit up till dinner-time, and Jack is so tired after a long ride with his father that, for a wonder, he asked to go to bed, too."

Here dinner was announced, and the trio discussed general topics, but haltingly and with a sense of waiting for the real subject in their thoughts, which is a bar to fluency.

At last they were alone, and Damer passed the claret to his brother-in-law with an enquiring look.

"I heard yesterday morning," began Riversdale, "that Derek sailed last week for Bombay, and that Celia was left behind with her 'aunt.' It seemed deuced queer, so I went up to a place beyond the country side of Kensington Gardens (it's all town nowadays, every step of the way), but I couldn't get in. Mrs. Rivers was not very well,—lying down with a bad headache. Now, I do not believe she ever had a headache in her life, so I left my card and came back. I wrote her a line saying I was coming here to-day, and saying how sorry I was not to see her. I asked her, too, to let me know how she was and when she was coming back to the Grange."

"I wrote to her a week ago, and have had no reply yet," said Lady Mary.

"It would be better for them both if Derek had a settled occupation," said Damer.

"There can be no doubt of that," remarked Lady Mary,

and she paused. "I am very anxious to see Celia, and" (to her husband) "if you have no objection I will go up to town to-morrow for a day or two. She will not refuse to see me even if she is lying down with a headache."

"Yes, do, Mary," cried Riversdale. "It will comfort her if she is in trouble; if not, why, you'll find out how the land really lies."

The proposition was finally agreed upon, and, after a long talk about Derek and his peculiarities, his mysterious departure without a word to his nearest relatives and friends, Riversdale left them.

Lady Mary Damer, in spite of the gentle deliberation of her movements, was a very active woman, and started early enough the next morning to permit of her reaching town, of taking some luncheon, and reaching Mandeville Terrace soon after four. "Yes, Mrs. Rivers is at home!" was the reply to her enquiry, and she followed the servant up-stairs in some trepidation. She was sincerely attached to her cousin, who was nearly as much her brother as Riversdale, and it wounded her deeply to think that he had acted heartlessly to his young wife, especially as she was thoroughly inclined to believe her undeserving such treatment.

The large, showy drawing-room was empty when she entered, and, having invited her to sit down, the man left her to inform Mrs. Rivers, while Lady Mary mentally returned thanks that Aunt Sarah was not visible.

The moments seemed long until the door opened to admit Celia. She was rather pale, but otherwise looked much as usual, and was carefully dressed. She smiled—a grave smile—as she held out her hand to her visitor, saying, "I had no idea you were in town."

"My coming was quite a sudden thought," returned Lady Mary, kissing her kindly; "and, of course, my first act was to find if you were still with Mrs. Twiss. I quite expected you would be at the Grange when we came home."

"I suppose so. And little Maud? I hope she is quite well again?"

"Yes; she has nearly lost that horrid cough, and is beginning to gather a few roses in her cheeks."

"Is Mr. Damer with you?"

"Oh, no. He is so glad to be at home, it will not be easy to uproot him again."

There was a pause. Lady Mary felt that this assumption of an ordinary tone by Celia was raising an insurmountable barrier to the confidence she wished to win. She must break it down.

They sat together on the sofa beside the fire. Lady Mary took a sudden resolution, and, laying her hand on Celia's, said, gently, "You will not, I am sure, consider me intrusive if, as a real friend and almost a sister to Derek, I venture to ask if it is really true that he has gone to India?"

"No one could consider you intrusive," returned Celia, in a polite voice. "It is quite true. My husband sailed—this day week, I think it was—for Bombay. He wished to join his regiment in case any hostilities arose." Still the same self-possession.

"And is it not very trying for you to be left alone?"

"Not so bad as I should have thought it a couple of months ago."

"What does that mean? Celia, do confide in me. You know I have liked you from the first. I was drawn to you; and these first differences generally prove fatal if not speedily healed."

Celia was silent for a moment. Lady Mary saw that her lips quivered, and guessed that she waited to gain command of her voice. She clasped her hands tightly together and said, in a low voice, "I *will* trust you because you are Derek's nearest friend and understand him; and more, because you are yourself. Derek has left me, with no intention, I believe, of returning."

“Impossible ! What can possibly have caused such a breach between you ?”

“Oh, I am not faultless. I will tell you everything,” and Celia went on to detail the struggle respecting Lady Phipps, her own allusion to the rights her money gave her, Derek’s anger at the repetition of what he considered a grave insult, her effort to effect a reconciliation, and, finding an infinite relief in opening her heart to a sympathetic listener, the tide of her confidence swelled, and she ran hastily to her room, returning with the copy of her second letter to her husband and his reply. It ran thus : “There is nothing in yours which induces me to alter my plans. It seems to me that there is not much danger of either of us breaking the other’s heart. If you can suggest any arrangement which can add to your happiness or comfort other than reunion, I shall be most happy to agree to it.”

“How unfortunate !” exclaimed Lady Mary ; “and how harsh, how unpardonable of Derek ! Mr. Damer and Riversdale will be most indignant with him. He seems lost to all sense of justice or duty. But, dear Celia, I don’t think this was the sort of letter to bring him back.”

“Wasn’t it ?” said Celia, opening her large eyes. “I wrote so many, and tried to be calm and sensible, and not to sicken him with my love, or to say how my heart ached for him, lest he should despise me as I despised myself.”

“That might have brought him back.”

“Would it have done me much good if it did ?” asked Celia. “If he returned from a sense of contemptuous compassion, I should have only sold myself into slavery, and that I never could endure. Ah, Lady Mary, it is a very hopeless affair. I can do nothing more. This, however, I promise you ; if, within six months from this time, Derek asks me to forgive and take him back, I will. Not that I think I should be particularly happy with him, but for the sake of the vow I made with my whole heart, to hold to him for better, for

worse. The kind of love he showed me can have had little reality, and even that seems to have evaporated. Had I deceived and betrayed him, had I been the worst of women, he could have done no more than he has done. A week ago I could have forgiven more easily ; now——”

She covered her face with her hands and her bosom heaved. “Yet I long unutterably to hear his voice, to look upon his face, but never, never shall I ask him again to come back.”

“It is too cruel a trial for you, my dear child,” cried Lady Mary, warmly. “I will write my full opinion to Derek and say——”

“Say, above all things, that until he writes to me I will never address him ; that his severity saves me harmless from the blame of my foolish impetuosity.”

Lady Mary’s thoughtful face grew very grave.

“It is all far more serious than I anticipated,” she said. “What do you think of doing?”

“Nothing, except to wait and see what time may bring forth. I shall stay with my aunt. I have always been happy enough with her.”

“I trust you will give some of your time to us, my dear Celia. You will, indeed, be most welcome.”

“Oh, no, no ! I never could go to that dear country again,” cried Celia, her voice breaking, “not at least alone. But I thank you heartily. I see the kindness and generosity that prompts you. But you cannot help me ; no one can help me. There is nothing for it but to wait patiently, and yet I do not feel to have any patience.”

“At least, you do not forbid me to tell all to my husband and Riversdale?”

“No. Do as you choose ; but I do not want to pose as a complaining, vindictive wife. I do not want anyone to take my part, for no one can help me. I must bear the sorrow that fate has sent me.”

"At all events, I will write to Derek and tell him what I think. *That* I have every right to do."

"Do as you like, Lady Mary; and you will not think me rude and strange, but I am going to beg you will leave me now. I do not want you to meet my aunt. She is a good deal excited about this unhappy affair, and has not enough self-control to avoid saying unpleasant things, but," taking Lady Mary's hand in both her own, "oh! I should like to see you again. Shall you be in town to-morrow?"

"Yes, and can wait a few days, if there is any possibility of helping you."

"How good you are. I will come and talk to you to-morrow morning, if I may?"

"Come and spend the day with me."

"Part of it, certainly, with pleasure."

They descended to the hall and parted with a warm hand-pressure.

CHAPTER XVII.

CELIA'S long morning with Lady Mary comforted her a little. The sympathy and approval of such a woman was a strong support. They talked fully and freely of their acquaintanceship from its beginning to the present moment. With her usual outspoken candour, Celia told Lady Mary of the distrust and almost dread she had awakened when Derek had held her up as a model, and how long she had been in surmounting it, but she rather avoided speaking of her husband, though the conversation always tended towards him, and her interlocutor felt how dominant the thought of him was in his wife's heart and mind. "She has no small degree of strength for so young a creature," thought Lady Mary, when Celia stood up to say good-bye.

"I must leave you now, dear Lady Mary," she said. "My aunt likes me to be with her at luncheon, and she is all I have left to me now. I have scarcely another relation in the world, and she clings to me."

They parted with a sincere feeling of regard, and it was a considerable time before they met again.

One or two painful interviews with her guardian, whose indignation with Captain Rivers was great, but who was obliged to confess that for the present nothing was to be done, except to keep a sharp lookout upon the erring husband, and Celia seemed to have returned to the conditions of her unmarried life, minus the sunny hopefulness of an unclouded existence that neither knew nor feared sin or sorrow.

The change was terrible. Though faithfully attached to her aunt and inured to her peculiarities of speech, she was often bored and offended by her narrowness and vulgarity. She had great difficulty, also, in imposing silence on her respecting Rivers, Mrs. Twiss being disposed to launch forth into torrents of abuse on this topic in and out of season. But Celia was no longer the light-hearted, girlish creature who looked up to her aunt as a personage of vast authority. She had acquired a certain air of decision, chiefly arising from her absorption in another range of thought, which rendered her careless and heedless of everything and everyone. Mrs. Twiss could not stand before her for a moment.

The irksomeness of life to her at this period was intolerable, inexpressible, nor could she see any way of deliverance out of it.

Were Derek to come back to-morrow and beg her to live with him again, it would hardly bring her any joy. She was profoundly convinced that it would only be compassion, or a reluctant sense of duty that actuated him, and that he never did and never could love her. Still, she strove to resist the bitterness which was settling down upon her. Books were her best help, but at times these failed.

Some little time after Lady Mary's visit Celia caught cold one damp, drizzling day, when, finding it intolerable to sit still, she imprudently went to try the effect of a quick walk in Kensington Gardens. She soon developed a tiresome cough, grew wakeful at night, and hated her food. Mrs. Twiss grew fidgety, and in her anxiety for her niece quite recovered her own health.

Things had now settled down, and Celia began to feel as if the last year had been a lovely dream, and only wondered she had ever believed it could last.

One afternoon, as Mrs. Twiss sat sipping her tea, having just returned from a shopping expedition, and was in the act of pressing some muffins on Celia, Lord Riversdale's card was brought to the latter.

"I really do not feel equal to see him," she said, languidly. She was sitting close to the fire in a deep arm-chair, feeling utterly inert.

"Now, that is down-right nonsense," cried her aunt, with animation. "Why should you give him the cold shoulder?—a nice, good-humoured, plain-spoken man, who has always been friendly with you. Show his lordship up, Stephens, and put a chair by Mrs. Rivers."

The next moment, Celia's heart gave a bound and then throbbed almost painfully, as Riversdale entered. He was not really like his cousin, yet something in his air and the turn of his head reminded her forcibly of her husband. He came quickly across the room and shook hands cordially with her; then bowed a little ceremoniously to Mrs. Twiss.

"I was afraid you were going to refuse me admittance," he said; "and I assure you I have been looking forward to this visit." He took the chair placed for him. "I intended to have been up in town more than ten days ago."

"I am very glad to see you," said Celia, gently. "I suppose you have plenty to do at Riversdale now?"

"Oh, yes; we are never idle. Now, tell me, how goes

it? You do not look very first-rate," and he gazed at her with kindly interest.

"I have rather a heavy cold, but it will soon pass away."

"There's nothing like change of air for a cold. Now, suppose you come down to Riversdale next week. It is a sheltered place, you know, and a short spell of country life would do you all the good in the world."

Celia shook her head. "Thank you very much, but that pleasure is out of the question."

"Why do you say that, Celia?" cried Aunt Sarah. "His lordship is quite right as regards change of air; but may I ask if Lady Mary Damer would be of the party?"

"No. She hates leaving home, and some of Damer's people who have just returned from Australia are going to stay at the Court."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Twiss (a long drawn ah!); "then I don't see how my niece could go and stay with you," and Mrs. Twiss, who was still in her outdoor garments, threw back her bonnet-strings emphatically.

"But, my dear madam," cried the earl, "I hope *you* will give me the pleasure of your company also. You do not suppose I should leave you out in the cold!"

"I'm sure you are most polite, and I am much obliged to you. Now, Celia, I must insist on your accepting Lord Riversdale's kind invitation. It is the very thing that would set you up. It is just rude and uncivil to refuse."

Celia looked at him, and he read refusal in her speaking eyes.

"Don't think me ungracious, dear Riversdale," she said, in a tone of supplication; "but I cannot go: it would kill me."

There was a pause, during which Aunt Sarah reflected with a delightful sense of distinction on the easy familiarity between Celia and a real, live earl, and how glibly the words

"dear Riversdale" came to her lips. There was an instant's pause ; then he said, in a tone of much feeling :

"I will not press you, Celia ; not, at least, now. But promise me a visit when you feel equal to such an undertaking. You know how welcome you would be."

"I do ; and later I should probably be pleased to go, but not now." Again there was a brief silence, and Celia began to ask about some of her acquaintances in Brookshire. "And I suppose the vicar is settled at home again. I hope he is the better for his journey."

"Well, no. I am sorry to say he is the worse. The baths and waters did him good, but on their way back he and his daughter stayed for ten days in Paris. Driving one day in the Bois, a carriage ran into their fiacre and overturned it. The vicar did not seem much hurt, and Gertrude escaped altogether except for a few bruises, but her father got a bad twist in his back, and the doctors fear it will prove a tedious business."

"I am exceedingly sorry to hear it !" exclaimed Celia, with more interest than she had yet shown. "But he is such a fine, healthy man, he will soon be himself again."

"I am not so sure. If he is a fine man, he is also a heavy one. I earnestly hope he will come right. We could ill spare him at Riversdale."

"Wasn't that a gentleman I met at your house, Lord Riversdale? I believe he was a minister, though he looked more like a squire," said Mrs. Twiss.

"Yes, Mr. Wilmot ; he has been our vicar for more than forty-five years."

"Dear me ! Why, that is a lifetime."

"It is, indeed ; and a busy, useful lifetime."

A little more talk of Riversdale and its neighbours, then its owner said he must go.

"Remember," he said, as he shook hands with his cousin's wife, "you must not hesitate to give me any commission you

may want to have done at the Grange or anywhere. I shall be at home all the winter, and Damer and I can manage anything you want. My agent is a capital fellow."

"Thank you. I may be very glad of your help," returned Celia, looking wistfully into his eyes. "I shall ask you and Lady Mary sometimes to look in at the Grange and see that all goes well. I shall have the house kept up until May next, at all events; and, Riversdale," moving with him towards the door, "if you will do me a favour, take that chestnut hunter, Cedric, into your own stables and ride him this winter. I am sure Derek would like it, and I should, especially. With you he would be properly managed and taken care of."

"Then I shall have to thank you for a capital mount. You may trust Cedric in my hands, and I'll keep you posted up in our doings. Good-bye, Mrs. Twiss. Very sorry your niece will not allow me the pleasure of welcoming you at Riversdale, or, rather, postpones it. Wish I could give a better report of you at the Court. Be sure you let us know how you are from time to time," and Lord Riversdale was gone.

* * * * *

Aunt Sarah's favourite doctor was less successful with her niece. Celia grew thinner and whiter and weaker. She made no change in her way of life for a while. Every morning she came down punctually to breakfast. She tried to read to herself and also aloud. She attempted some fancy work. She wrote an occasional letter to Lady Mary Damer, but gradually all these occupations became impossible, and one after another were given up. At last Dr. Barker took fright and suggested another opinion. Mrs. Twiss, in sudden alarm, sent for a great specialist, who declared her case very serious. A low, feverish condition was sapping her strength, the result, it seemed to him, of a nervous shock, and the only remedy he could suggest was immediate and complete change.

"You can help yourself, too, my dear young lady," he said, "by endeavouring to throw off this depression which weighs you down. Determine to live, and your strength will return. You cannot be tired of life."

"No!" exclaimed Celia, roused from her lethargic condition, for the great doctor's tone startled her. "I will not let myself feel this apathy. It is cowardly and wrong, and there may be treasures hidden in the future I might not like to miss. I have let myself go too much."

"If you have that spirit you will pull through. But get away somewhere. Don't let me hear of your being in town next week. Go out. Go to the theatre—Wyndham has something very droll on just now. Move about, and don't *think*. Settle about some new place for the winter, and pack up at once. Follow the swallows in their southern flight. You will be another woman in a couple of months."

Having followed the man of healing down-stairs and exchanged a few private words with him, Mrs. Twiss returned with a smiling face, though her eyes looked moist.

"Well, my dear child, and where shall we go? You must have warmth. I suppose it must be somewhere in Italy."

"Oh, no, no, no," interrupted Celia, clasping her hands. "Not Italy. I could not bear it."

"Then where shall it be? Pau? Biarritz?"

"Would you dislike Algeria?" asked Celia.

"Dislike Algeria? No, not at all, if you have any liking for it. I can't say I like crossing the sea, but if it will do you good and save your precious life, I'd go to Timbuctoo," cried Aunt Sarah, the tears welling over and rolling unheeded over her round, rubicund cheeks. "I wonder if that heartless brute—I can't call him anything else—ever thinks that he might break your heart and have your life to answer for. I wish I had half an hour's talk with him. I'd open his eyes."

"Don't, auntie, I cannot bear it; but I am a little ashamed of myself. I did not know how ill I was. I will try and get

well. Life is too precious to be allowed to slip away. I may pick up the broken threads and weave a new web for myself."

"That's right, Celia. Keep up your heart."

* * * * *

After much consultation, it was decided, as Celia objected to Italy, that Algeria would be the most complete change for the invalid.

From this day forth Aunt Sarah knew no rest; she interviewed tourist agents and couriers, wrote innumerable letters, visited her lawyer, her stock-broker, her banker, presided over more than one interview between Celia and her ex-guardian—always a trying ordeal to the former—ransacked the shops, and bought endless bargains.

The Damers came up to town to bid her an affectionate good-bye. Lady Mary offered to write to some acquaintances of hers who usually wintered in Algeria to call on Mrs. Twiss and her niece, an offer Celia at first refused.

"Take my advice," returned Lady Mary, "do not shut yourself up. I am sure you will like the Hardings. They are people who think and feel;" and Celia allowed herself to be persuaded.

Then, after a pause, Lady Mary said, with a little hesitation, "And, Celia, if Derek writes to you, as he ought to do, you will not refuse to listen to his prayer?"

"I will not. I greatly doubt his ever repenting. Above all things, do not overpersuade Derek to return to me. If he does not return to me of his own free will, our last state will be worse than the first."

A little more talk of the children and Damer Court, earnest promises to write, and they parted with a few tears and a hearty kiss.

The next day Aunt Sarah and her beloved Celia started on their journey. It was many months before they saw England again, and when they did all things had become new—to Celia, at any rate.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BRIGHT, crisp afternoon in late October had thronged the Champs-Élysées with pedestrians of all classes, when two Englishmen recognised each other at the corner of that fine avenue and the "Place de la Concorde." The shorter of the two exclaimed, "Ha, Riversdale!" the other, "Why, Preston! I thought you were in Scotland."

"I have just come from the Land o' Cakes. How is it you have deserted the pheasants and partridges of your native fields?"

"I have not done so in pursuit of pleasure, I assure you; but which way are you going?"

"Oh, anywhere; I will turn with you."

"Yes, come along. I am going to see some acquaintances of yours, Mrs. Rivers and her aunt."

"Indeed! I thought they were in England. I have quite lost sight of Mrs. Rivers."

"She has not been in England for quite two years. Her aunt, Mrs. Twiss, has been in town two or three times, but Mrs. Rivers did not accompany her. They have been wandering a good deal, and spent last winter in Sicily. The truth is, I came over here to confer with them about a very unpleasant matter. Have you heard anything lately of Derek?"

"Well, yes; some gossip. I did not attend much to it. He disappeared for a considerable time; then I saw some mention of him in General Hervey's report of the expedition against the hill tribes, up in the Chaudrapur district——" He paused.

"Oh, we have ceased to correspond. I fancy he sees he has made a desperate mistake, but I am afraid he is not the sort of man to cry *Peccavi*. I should like to know what is the gossip you have heard?"

"I met Colonel Willoughby the day before yesterday at Mrs. Tanes. He had only just arrived from India, and, talking over our mutual acquaintances, he mentioned that Derek Rivers had gone off with the wife of an officer in a native regiment, and there had been a good deal of scandal about it. I didn't believe it; for I didn't think he was the sort of fellow to do such a thing."

"There's no knowing what any man may do," returned Riversdale. "I have heard a good deal about the affair, and am afraid it is a bad business. I don't know how Mrs. Rivers will take it. She is profoundly silent as regards her husband, but she is not a woman to forget quickly. This act will probably enable her to break her bonds, and she will be a fool not to take advantage of it. I don't think I ever was so cut up as about Derek's conduct; it is inexplicable. I certainly thought he was fond of his wife. She's a girl any man might be fond of; but no one gave her credit for the spirit she has shown. I fancy if she had written imploringly, said she was dying for him, and that sort of thing, he might have come back. Now, I have to break this affair to her, and I must say I funk it. That is the reason I want you to come with me, just to reconnoitre the ground. She may have heard some rumours of the affair, then I shall be spared breaking the news. You and she used to be chums, and she will be pleased to see you. She is a good deal changed, but not a bit a woman with a grievance."

"I shall be very glad to see Mrs. Rivers again. I suppose she lives with her aunt."

"Yes; the aunt is not a model of elegance, but she's a good soul, and a capable sort of woman."

Thus talking, they reached "The Continental," and were duly shown up to Mrs. Twiss's sitting-room.

Celia was at the piano when they entered, and came to meet them with a smile of welcome.

She was, indeed, changed, Preston thought. She seemed

decidedly older; the bright laughing look had left her face, and was replaced by a thoughtful expression. Her brown eyes were graver and sweeter than they used to be, and seemed larger, too, for both face and figure were considerably thinner. Her hair was darker, but it had not lost its golden tinge. Then she looked taller, though still barely reaching middle height, and her movements were slower and quieter.

"Ah! Riversdale," she exclaimed; "this is a pleasant surprise, and you, Mr. Preston! What ages since we met! I am very glad to see you."

She sat down in a low arm-chair near one of the windows which overlooked the Tuilleries Gardens. Both men took their places near, with the comfortable feeling that they were thoroughly welcome.

Lord Riversdale was animated and talkative, being restless with a dread of the explanation that was to follow, but Preston was silent and observant.

Mrs. Twiss was out shopping, Celia said. "In fact," she added, "we have put into the port of Paris to refit. I want to go to Egypt this winter, and we seem to have worn out all our clothes. Poor Aunt Sarah would like to winter in London, but I am selfish enough to refuse. I cannot return yet."

These last words were the only hint she gave that things were changed with her. Her tone was quietly cheerful, and Preston gathered that she had been greatly interested by her travels. She had lingered rather late in Algiers, and then with her aunt joined Lord Riversdale in a cruise to the coast of Norway.

Celia spoke of the extraordinary difference between the colour and glow and richness of the south and the grim, stern strength, the self-sustaining individualism of the north. "Lovely and delightful as the shores of the Mediterranean are, I am always thankful that I belong to a northern race," she said.

Both Riversdale and Preston felt, as she spoke with unaffected interest of all she had seen since they had met, that she had not heard any hint of Derek's last exploit.

Having satisfied himself that the unpleasant task of breaking his news to the person most interested still lay before him, Riversdale gave Preston an expressive look, whereupon the latter rose to take leave.

"Are you making any stay here?" asked Celia, as she gave him her hand.

"I am all uncertain, Mrs. Rivers; the world's before me where to choose."

"Leave me your address, however. I do not think we shall go to Egypt before the beginning of December."

"I am staying at Meurice's, which has always been my head-quarters in Paris."

"Pray look in, then, when you have time. I fancy you are always busy."

"Not just now," returned Preston, and with a friendly nod to Riversdale he left the room.

"I like him so much," exclaimed Celia, with something of her old frank abruptness. "Of the abundance of his mind his mouth speaketh. He seems to have reflected on everything under the sun. But what is the matter with *you*, Riversdale? Why are you so restless?"

He had not sat down after Preston left, and was now pacing the room, while Celia had gone to the window, attracted by the sounds of the drum and cornet-à-piston of some vendor of quack medicines.

"I am restless, because I have something disagreeable to say to you."

"Then pray say it at once," she returned, growing very white, adding, as he still hesitated, "Is it—is it about Derek?"

"It is, I am sorry to say." He stopped.

"Is he dead?" exclaimed Celia, with a sort of cry, while

she caught the back of the chair in which she had been sitting.

"No, not dead, but pretty well done for. He has gone off with the wife of an officer in an Indian corps," blurted out Riversdale. This was the result of all his meditations respecting the best way to break the news to his cousin's wife.

Celia stepped back as if she had received a blow, clasping her hands together, her eyes opening wide with a dazed look.

"It cannot be true! Are you sure?"

"I fear it is true. When the rumour first reached me I telegraphed to a friend in the same station with Derek, and his reply left no doubt of its truth."

Celia let her hands fall. "But it is not like Derek. He was the soul of honour," she said, with quivering lips.

"Well, no. I didn't think he was the sort of fellow to go off with another man's wife. As yet we know no particulars, but I have written to ask for them."

"Whom have you asked?"

"Derek himself. He will write the truth or not reply at all, which will be reply enough."

"Ah, Riversdale, *how* he must have loved her to take another man's wife!" cried Celia, in a tone of anguish that pierced the earl's kind heart.

"He isn't worth your regret. You must put him out of your mind."

"I have been trying hard not to think of him, so hard, and it helped me—I mean believing that he had no love in him helped me. But how intensely he must love this woman to commit such an act, to persuade her to commit it. And he did love me once; don't you think he did?"

"Certainly, unquestionably. What quality of love he can give is another matter, nor can we conjecture what amount of persuasion the lady required to accept his protection. At any rate, I fancy your freedom is at your command if you choose."

"It has no value in my eyes. Oh, how my aunt will exult! She is a good and a highly moral woman, yet she will, I believe, rejoice in this downfall of two people, one of whom certainly has never offended her."

"Yes, of course; I quite understand that. It is only natural," said Riversdale, with a slight smile, but Celia did not seem to hear him. She stood silent, gazing at vacancy.

"I have been very unfortunate," she said, at length, as if to herself. "I suppose he could not care for me. Human love is *not* the growth of human will. But why is it that I love him so much? Yes; still my heart aches for him, and it is all such a cruel humiliation. Am I contemptibly weak to feel like this?"

"No; of course not. Any woman, any wife would feel the same. I have no patience with the scoundrel who has inflicted such suffering on a creature like you. By Jove! I will never speak to Derek again!" And Riversdale resumed his troubled walks.

"Is it not rather strange that I don't feel angry so much as sorrow-stricken? It has been such an awful misfortune to us both. Would it not have been an awful destiny to live on with Derek, knowing that he stayed with me only from a sense of duty?"

"I can't imagine anyone living with you and not loving you!" exclaimed Riversdale, warmly.

Celia scarcely noticed him.

"And we must not forget that I bitterly offended him," she went on. "All that is over now. Only we must be careful to do nothing hastily or vindictively. If what you have heard is true, I will certainly set Derek free to live respectably with the woman who has drawn out his deeper affection. Then I must cure myself. Can I not do so? Do you think I am especially weak and despicable?"

"You? Great heavens! No."

"Well, I have made my moan. I suppose silence will help me to forget. At all events——"

The entrance of Aunt Sarah stopped her further speech.

"Ah! Lord Riversdale, I *am* glad to see you. I didn't think we would have a peep at you before we went to Cairo."

"Oh, I should certainly have run over to wish you *bon voyage*."

"And how is Lady Mary?" continued Mrs. Twiss, radiantly, for a visit from the earl always put her in high spirits. "We were quite shocked to see the death of Mr. Wilmot in the paper. Such a fine, hale, strong-looking man. One might have thought he would have lived to a hundred."

"It was a relief to him, I assure you. You remember his meeting with an accident in the Bois de Boulogne a long time ago? It seems that, although he seemed to get over it, his spine was injured, and his sufferings steadily increased till even his daughter, who was a devoted nurse, thanked God when all was over. He bore up with immense pluck and patience."

"Dear, dear! that was a *sad* end. Is that the reason you are looking so white, child?"

"No," and Celia paused. "I am afraid nothing not personal would affect me so deeply," she resumed. "Lord Riversdale, will *you* tell my aunt? I—I cannot go through the miserable story again."

"Leave it to me," he returned, and crossed the room to open the door for her. She paused on the threshold to give him her hand, saying, "You have been very good to me," and then went swiftly away. Meantime, Mrs. Twiss moved into a more comfortable chair and loosened her bonnet strings.

"Now, then, what *is* up?" she asked. Whereupon Riversdale told her his tidings in a very few words.

"My goodness gracious!" she exclaimed, having listened without interruption to the end. "I have been expecting

something of this kind all along. It's just what a rackety, unprincipled, upsetting, overbearing, aristocratic scapegrace would do. What does *he* care what happens to anyone so long as he indulges his own whims and gratifies his own wicked fancies? Men like him think the whole world is created for their use and amusement. Well, I hope my poor darling will now see what he really is and get rid of him. I'll go over to London to-morrow and set old Ridley on the scent. The sooner he sets about the divorce the better. God knows how anxiously I've watched for this chance," she concluded, piously, then resumed, eagerly, "Do you think, Lord Riversdale, she will be able to get back the good money that she settled on that scoundrel?"

"I am an indifferent lawyer, Mrs. Twiss, but I fear not; and I ought to mention that after the first six months of his life in India Derek never touched a penny of it. His trustees have applied to me for advice in the matter, for he refuses to take the money and gives no direction as to its disposal. They therefore simply let it accumulate."

"Just you wait. Wait till this new madam bothers him, and he'll find the cash uncommon handy. Well, I don't care what becomes of the good-for-nothing jackanapes. All I want is to get my precious pet clear of him and to save her life from being ruined and lonely, and I'm sure I don't know how he comes to belong to such people as yourself and Lady Mary Damer."

"I am awfully ashamed of my cousin's conduct," exclaimed Riversdale. "It stupefies me. I thought him a first-rate fellow and a thorough gentleman, a little overbearing, but his conduct to such a charming wife is inexplicable. My sister, who read the letters which passed between your niece and her husband, is of opinion that Mrs. Rivers took too independent a tone; that had she expressed a more passionate desire for reunion it would have had——"

"Too independent a tone!" broke in Aunt Sarah, indig-

nantly ; " and why should she ? With her fortune, who had a better right ? "

This seemed unanswerable to Riversdale, though it was not exactly his view of the subject, so he kept silence.

" Never mind, " resumed Mrs. Twiss. " I'm sure I don't care how it is managed so long as she gets rid of him. He has near broken her heart, but not quite, thank God ! She has a touch of her aunt's spirit, and you'll see she will be all right before another year is over. She was a mere child when that hard-hearted tyrant—I really must say so, though he is your cousin, my lord—persuaded her to marry him, and she'll forget all about him. When she makes a second and a better choice, perhaps she'll think a little more of my advice when she sees the muddle she has made by going against it. "

" I earnestly hope the future may reward her for the past, " said Riversdale, in a tone of sincere feeling. " And now, my dear Mrs. Twiss, I shall leave you. You must be anxious to see and discuss matters with Celia, especially as you think of—— "

" Bless you ! " she interrupted ; " Celia won't let me say a syllable about that precious husband of hers that isn't absolutely necessary. I only pray she will agree to divorce him. You see she came of age last spring and has everything in her own hands now. At any rate, I'll be off to London to-morrow and take her with me if I can, only she does so hate the thoughts of going there. Yet she will be dreadful lonely here. It is only quite lately she took to making acquaintances, and none of them are here, I fancy. I wish, if it's not making too free to ask, that you could stay a few days and look after her a bit. She has a sort of dependence on you. "

" I am only too glad to be of the slightest use, " cried Riversdale, heartily. " I am close at hand. So, good-morning. Had I not better look in this evening to ascertain your final arrangements ? "

"Yes, do. I'd say come to dinner, only I'm afraid *she* mightn't like it. Not but she likes to——"

"Yes, yes; exactly. I quite understand. About nine, then, I'll call."

"Good-bye, and thank you."

As soon as the door had closed on her visitor, Aunt Sarah made a slight but triumphant gesture, more emphatic than elegant; in short, she snapped her fingers.

"I've got my old luck back," she said aloud to herself. "Things will come right now and finish up as I wish as sure as eggs is eggs."

Aunt Sarah, when alone, was not careful of her speech. Then she hurried away as fast as her increasing proportions would allow to Celia's room. She paused an instant at the door to tone down the expression which she knew animated her face before she entered, for in some inexplicable way she had grown rather afraid of her niece in spite of Celia's increased quietness and gentleness.

She found her sitting in the window, her elbows resting on the writing-table in front of her; her chin on her palms, and her eyes gazing at vacancy. She did not stir on her aunt's entrance.

When Mrs. Twiss came close, she raised her head and put out her hand silently.

"Well, my poor, dear lamb," began Aunt Sarah, who did not consider silence golden, "you must just bear up, for I don't doubt but in the end all will turn out for the best."

Celia lifted up her face. At first Mrs. Twiss was startled by the gloom of her big brown eyes, then, to her surprise, a slow smile crept over her face, and, pressing the hand that held hers, she said, "I am afraid, auntie, that the 'bonds of wedlock' have no particular sanctity in your eyes."

"What makes you say that, Celia? I'm sure I was always a dutiful wife, and helped both my poor men all I could to make the little bit of money we scraped together. But, my

dear, what's the use of sanctity when it's all on one side? If you are married to a brute who hasn't as much——"

"My dear aunt, words are of little use. I have no doubt now as to what I ought to do; let us do what is necessary as silently as possible."

"Then you will go in for a divorce?"

"I will, *if* the rumours Lord Riversdale repeated are true. We must make sure of that first."

"Of course," cried Aunt Sarah, eagerly. "I am thinking of going over to London to-morrow to see Ridley; won't you come with me? You will want to give your own directions, eh?"

"No, not at first; there must be a good deal of preliminary work. If it is at any time necessary, I will go, but not now."

"Oh, well, you must please yourself; but you will be lonesome here."

"I am lonesome everywhere. Yet I hate to meet people; but, auntie, I shall try to be wiser, more reasonable, and nicer to you."

"My dear, you are an angel—sometimes."

CHAPTER XIX.

RIVERSDALE was deeply impressed by the obligation he had undertaken to look after his cousin's wife, and most anxious to fulfil his duties. When he called to enquire what were Aunt Sarah's final plans, Celia had gone to her room, and he considered it distinctly incumbent on him to visit her the following afternoon.

He was at once admitted, and found her sitting before a table on which stood a large photograph of Derek, at which

she had evidently been gazing. She stretched out her hand to him without rising, and said, "I thought you would come."

Riversdale, who expected to find her in a state of abject depression or quivering with just indignation, was surprised at her composure, though an air of languor pervaded her manner as if she suffered from physical fatigue.

"Mrs. Twiss was off in good time this morning?" he asked.

"Yes; she left rather too early. She always does, and in excellent spirits," added Celia, with a slight smile, "though she seemed a little uneasy at leaving me here alone. I am, however, quite capable of taking care of myself. You don't know how old and experienced I feel."

"Believe me, you will feel years younger before a twelve-month passes over your head."

"I hope so; I do hope so!" cried Celia, with sudden animation. "I am dreadfully tired of being unhappy and sore at heart. It is so foreign to my nature to sit still in my sorrow. I always feel that I must kill grief or it will kill me. Oh, Riversdale, how odious I must have been for Derek to have given up home-life, your friendship, and dear Lady Mary's—he was so fond of you both—rather than endure my company!" She laughed a sad little laugh.

"It was absolute insanity!" he exclaimed. "He left you in a fit of bad temper, and did not realise where it would lead him. I think he wanted a more unconditional surrender from you. If I could have spoken to him——"

"It would have been of no avail," interrupted Celia. "Do not cast Derek off altogether on my account," she went on. "He may want your friendship some day. There, Riversdale! I have said my last word on this subject, unless some necessity for mentioning it arises; so good-bye to my first love. It was not a very fortunate venture."

She rose and closed the case of the photograph, as if she had ended that chapter; then, crossing the room to look out

of the window, she exclaimed, "I wish you would take me for a drive somewhere, Riversdale! I want light and air. I do not want to be alone."

"No, of course not," he returned, eagerly. "Suppose we drive down to Sèvres! Have you ever seen the factory there? I think it would interest you, and let us dine together after. I'll ask Preston to join us."

"Thank you. I should like it very much," said Celia, adding, "I do not want to think any more."

The programme thus suggested was duly carried out, and, to Riversdale's great satisfaction, Celia seemed interested in all she saw; yet he observed that she did not lose the indescribable tone of languor that struck him so forcibly when they first met the previous day until conversing with Preston at dinner. Yet he thought it strange that she should be so absorbed by the dry subjects on which their talk turned,—racial characteristics, the difference between knowledge and belief, and such like topics, which to him seemed far above Celia's youthful curly head. Nevertheless, her interest was real and unaffected; nor did she seek to hide her ignorance of these deeper subjects, even while they attracted her strangely.

"The fellow talks wonderfully well," thought Riversdale, with a queer sense of annoyance, "and appears to draw her out of herself with his heavy metal, far more than I can do with more congenial topics."

"Shall you stay here much longer?" asked Celia, as she bade Preston good-night."

"For a few days, probably."

"Then do come and see me. Some things you said to-night have suggested truths I cannot understand, as Young says, and, like *Oliver Twist*, I dare to ask for more."

"If Preston is going to deliver more essays, may I not profit by the occasion?"

"Ah! Riversdale, you have been to school and to college and know all about everything, while I am a mere ignoramus."

"Pray, keep as you are," exclaimed the earl; "you want no cerulean ingredient either in your mind or manners."

"May I not rest my thoughts on subjects that are apart from myself, provided I wear rose colour for you, Riversdale?"

"I suspect you will do what you like with everyone's consent all the days of your life," he returned, smiling, as he shook hands with her at the door of her hotel.

Mrs. Twiss wrote in the most contented strain,—pleased to be in London, pleased by her first consultation with Mr. Ridley, who was as anxious as herself to take action, and quite excited about the task of cleaning her house from top to bottom. "If you can stay on another ten days in Paris, dear, I shall have the place like a new pin for you. It is a comfort to have English servants about one once more. I do hope you'll be content to stay at home this winter. I am that sick of foreign food and people and ways, and never hearing the sound of my own voice from not knowing the language. I'd rather pay twenty per cent. more for everything here than have it dirt cheap abroad, which it is not." So Celia stayed.

Preston and Lord Riversdale followed her example, and both did their best to cheer and divert her, although their methods were widely different.

Riversdale sought to interest her in the future, depicting the bright days which awaited her when she had cut herself clear from the wreckage which at present encumbered her, while Preston took her away from herself altogether, touching on topics of inexhaustible interest, old yet young as humanity itself, rousing a new spirit, a craving for the light which began to shimmer through the morning mists that still enwrapped her soul.

"Are you going to write another book, Mr. Preston?" she asked, one rainy morning, as they sat over a fire of glowing logs.

"I am cogitating some ideas which may make their way

into print some day," he returned. "But the incubation will be long. Hitherto I have dealt with things which may be seen, and which our hands can handle. The subject which suggests itself now is unseen and impalpable, and I must dig deep and reach far before I can assure myself of the truth."

"I am afraid I shall never understand anything so profound, though hitherto I have been rather proud of making out so much of your work as I have. I like those books you wrote first best,—your books of travel. Sir Percy Vernon, whom we used to see in Algeria, says they call you the *fin de siècle* Herodotus."

"A humiliating compliment," said Preston, laughing. "It suggests a mere modern, cheap imitation of a great original."

"I suppose you will be considered a great man."

"Or a great blunderer. Heaven only knows which."

"Why don't you write a novel?"

"I could not."

"That means you would not. You disdain such paltry work."

"Don't traduce me in that fashion, Mrs. Rivers. I think 'story-telling'—vivid story-telling—an enormous achievement. It needs a creative power few possess. It is second only, if second at all, to the stage. Indeed, it can give the drama points. The finest play can be destroyed by the actors, but a reader is in a way an actor himself. A strong writer makes his people live, and his readers live in them." There was a pause.

"I hope you will be in London this winter," said Celia.

"I am not sure. I want to be very quiet, yet I must be near good libraries. Shall you be in town?"

"I am not sure, either. I do not like the idea of spending the winter in London. I have such a craving for sunshine, yet it is rather cruel to drag my aunt abroad——"

Here Riversdale interrupted them, and, as he came to ask

Celia to accompany him to the Français, where "*Le Monde où l'on s'ennui*" was being acted, a discussion arose as to whether Celia ought or ought not to go, her visitors succeeded in persuading her to yield to her real inclination.

A few days later she left Paris, Lord Riversdale having announced his intention of following immediately.

Back again in London on a chill, murky, drizzling evening in early November, Celia felt her heart sink within her as she found herself alighting in the well-known Charing Cross station, and thought how strange it was to hear the porters and guards and all the employés speaking English after her absence of two solid, unbroken years.

It was hard to sustain herself against the rush of memories sweet and bitter that rose like a tide against the rampart of her resolution to be calm, reasonable, resigned, for the past was irrevocable, and she must not let herself even wish ever again to see her husband.

How fearfully crowded the streets were, and how wonderfully well the men drove!

Mrs. Twiss welcomed her niece most warmly.

"My dear child! I am afraid you had a very rough passage. I have been listening to the wind and thinking of you all day. I should have gone to meet you, only I have a cold, and my chest is so delicate. I know how you must feel, coming back to your home, or the same thing as your home, after the vile——"

"Not at all, auntie. I felt remarkably well," exclaimed Celia, quickly. "Both Lord Riversdale and Mr. Preston took excellent care of me. But I am very tired. I did not sleep well last night. I found myself watching for the dawn, —a foolish trick of mine, you know, on the eve of a journey. When I have had some dinner I shall be all right. How are you, auntie? You do not look particularly well."

"No, my dear; I am far from it. But it does me good to see you. Did you leave Lord Riversdale in Paris?"

"Yes, but he is coming over to-night."

"Oh! I'm sure I shall be very glad to see him. I have always said he is the best of the bunch."

"He is very kind, indeed. He will not stay in London, however. He is going through to Riversdale."

"Well, it's easy enough to come back from there. It's not across the sea; that is one comfort."

Celia made no reply, and went away to her room to prepare for dinner.

Mrs. Twiss, acting after her kind, had ordered a most dainty feast for her niece, and was quite hurt when she barely touched it. This was, in fact, a personal affront.

"There is no use in preparing food for a creature like you, Celia. I remembered all the things you liked, or used to like, for I declare you don't seem to care for anything now."

"You are always good and thoughtful for me, Aunt Sarah. I am a little too tired to eat this evening. To-morrow I will try to get up an enormous appetite."

"Oh! that is all very well; but if you don't eat and keep up your strength, I don't know how you are to get through all the troubles that are before you."

"Pray, don't remind me of them," cried Celia, smiling. "I intend to think as little as possible of painful things; that is really the best way of keeping up one's strength."

"Yes, certainly; only Mr. Ridley said he would call early to talk over matters with you."

"What, so soon! He might have given me a day's rest," exclaimed Celia, impatiently.

"Why, Celia, there is no time to be lost. I have been urging Mr. Ridley to hurry up as much as ever he could, and if you don't seem to mind about how things go, he won't care a fig for me."

"At any rate, I will not speak of what is unpleasant, to-night. Tell me, how is Mrs. Heavysides? and have you seen Mr. O'Gorman?"

Mr. O'Gorman was the enthusiastic Irish curate of the very evangelical district church Mrs. Twiss attended. The bait took, and Aunt Sarah held forth on the subject of these dear friends until her niece felt that she might conscientiously go to bed.

The next day was one of punishment, though Celia was glad to see her ex-guardian. They had always been good friends, and his objections to her marriage had been more implied than expressed.

On the present occasion, Mr. Ridley showed every consideration for her feelings; still, it was the most painful and the longest of the many interviews they were obliged to have in the future. The lawyer, too, was slightly nervous at having to cross-examine his young client on various particulars of her married life, and ask for copies of the few letters which had passed between her and her husband. But his visit came to an end at last, and, having refused an invitation to lunch, the lawyer took leave. "I fear it will be a lengthy and a costly process," he said, as he shook hands with Celia. "We have decided to examine witnesses by commission in India. Therefore, my dear lady, you must possess your soul in patience."

"I will try to do so," said Celia; "and, Mr. Ridley, must I stay in London all the time?"

"No, certainly not. You may take a trip every now and then to freshen you up, but don't be down-hearted. You will undoubtedly gain your cause. I feel convinced you will. Good-bye, my dear Mrs. Rivers, good-bye."

"And that is the best conclusion he can promise me," thought Celia, looking after him with a bitter smile. "They say the young are adaptable. Some day, surely some day I shall forget; this awful aching in my heart will cease, and I shall be happy. I shall love my life once more."

Meantime Aunt Sarah was greatly edified by Celia's composure and uncomplainingness.

"She is a wonderful creature, my dear," she said to her friend, Mrs. Heavysides, as they partook of light refreshment in the shape of strong tea and thickly buttered muffins one afternoon, when showers of sleet forbade their usual afternoon drive, "if you consider her youth. She has made up her mind to get quit of that worthless vagabond (I really must say it), her husband, and she is quite cool and collected. She won't even allow me to relieve my feelings by speaking of him as he deserves for fear it would excite her mind. She puts him clean out of it. Mark my words, my dear Mrs. Heavysides, she won't be free of *that* man a twelvemonth before she'll be married and a peeress of the realm, as she ought to be."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Mrs. Heavysides, in a tone of awed admiration.

"Yes, I do; but for the present I must keep my tongue quiet. A little more muffin, Mrs. Heavysides? I must say I never feel it is winter—real winter—till I have eaten a few muffins."

"That's just like me, Mrs. Twiss. It is nice to be sitting at tea with you once more."

"Well, it is comfortable here, and I can tell you it won't be easy to get me away farther than Brighton or Folkestone. If Celia wants to go trapesing over the continent, let her hire a companion. She can well afford it, and they can be had cheap, for I am sure they are a drug in the market."

There were times when Celia feared she could not live on with her aunt, so much worse did she seem when surrounded by her old habitués, and times when she reproached herself for her heartless selfishness in thinking of breaking away from her. It was therefore a great relief when it dawned upon her that Mrs. Twiss would not object to her occasional absence.

Returning from one of her purgatorial interviews with Mr. Ridley, she found Lady Mary Damer's cards. On one was

a pencilled line: "I shall be at home to-morrow and next day; do come and see me." And Celia gladly went.

How curious it was to find herself in the once familiar lift and ringing the bell as she used to. Then she had called with a mixture of resentment, reluctance, and some shame at the existence of these feelings. Now she looked forward eagerly to a meeting with Derek's favourite cousin, who was, she felt, her faithful friend.

Lady Mary received her with kindly warmth, embracing her gently, and, Celia observed, with moist eyes.

"I was so glad to hear you were in town, Celia, and fairly well. Riversdale told me all about you. You are looking better than I expected, but you seem to me browner than you used to be."

"I think I have been thoroughly tanned by sun and sea air; I have lived so much out of doors."

Then followed enquiries about each other's relatives. A little awkward pause ensued; then Lady Mary laid her hand on Celia's and said:

"I hardly like to speak on the painful topic, and yet I must, dear. Let me say that this terrible business is the first great sorrow of my life—sorrow and shame both."

"I knew how you would feel," returned Celia; "and you are the only person I will allow to speak to me of *him*, because, in spite of everything, something of your old affection for him still lurks in your heart. I feel it does. I am woefully weak, my dear Lady Mary, but I am trying hard to cure myself, and I am not like those savage worshippers who beat and maltreat their idols when they do not answer their prayers."

So they went on to discuss Derek's conduct and the unexpected turn of events gently and dispassionately, till Celia felt the relief of speaking out of the fulness of her heart.

"You will stay with me and have luncheon," said Lady Mary, presently; "I shall be, I think, alone."

But as she spoke the bell rang.

"You are probably mistaken," said Celia, rising; "and do not think me foolish, but I cannot meet strangers."

"I do not fancy it is a stranger. I think it must be Gertrude Wilmot. You remember the poor, dear vicar's eldest daughter?"

"Yes, of course. I was so sorry to hear of his death."

"He was a great loss to us all. Unfortunately, he had been induced to put his money into some very doubtful speculations, and everything has vanished. Poor Gertrude is quite unprovided for. She has too much spirit to live on anyone's charity, and is now trying to find some employment. You will not mind meeting *her*?"

"Miss Wilmot? Oh, no. I shall be glad to see her. I used to like her very much. I am awfully sorry to hear she is not well off. After all, to be poor must be an aggravation of everything."

"It is, indeed. Then let us go into the drawing-room. Gertrude will be very pleased to meet you again."

Miss Wilmot was standing by one of the windows when they went in and turned to meet them. Celia was struck by the change in her appearance. The bright colour which helped to make her prematurely grey hair so becoming had disappeared, and, though she did not look dejected, there was a touch of sternness in the gravity of her expression which vanished when she smiled.

"Here is an unexpected pleasure, my dear Gertrude. Mrs. Rivers has reappeared among us," said Lady Mary, as they shook hands.

"I am so glad to meet you again," exclaimed Miss Wilmot, with unaffected cordiality. "I certainly had very little idea of meeting you when I came to tell my news to Lady Mary."

"I hope it is good?"

"Yes; I may say very good."

"May I hear it, too?" asked Celia.

"You may, indeed. First, you must know I have been

seeking for employment, and no one who has not tried it knows the tremendous task *that* is. The people who need employés and the people who seek work seem to start on parallel lines, so that they never meet. I have done a daring thing, Lady Mary. I have accepted the post of Lady Superintendent in an orphanage. I only hope I may fill it with credit to myself and benefit to the institution. But I have my doubts. It is rather a complicated establishment with an infant-school and training-school."

"Oh, my dear Miss Wilmot, don't go there; it will be horrible!" cried Celia, with her usual impulsiveness. "Do come and live with me; you will do me such a kindness, such a service."

"My dear Mrs. Rivers, you take my breath away!" cried Miss Wilmot, the colour coming vividly to her cheek. "Your suggestion is delightful, but I greatly fear I have committed myself to the institution."

"I will not listen to such an objection. You have barely accepted the post—shall I say of danger? Pray, write and renounce it. That is," continued Celia, with a quaint, sad little smile, "unless you, too, believe me too difficult to live with."

"I am inclined to think you are most easy to live with," said Miss Wilmot, with some eagerness.

"And I am sure of it," added Lady Mary. "I wish, Gertrude, you would give up this orphanage concern. It seems to me that you and Mrs. Rivers would suit each other admirably. You might be of great use to Celia, and I am sure you would be very happy with her. Sit down, dear, at once, and write the orphans their dismissal. You cannot hesitate."

"I must ask twenty-four hours' reflection," urged Miss Wilmot, "and Mrs. Rivers ought to take the same, though we might have a sort of sliding engagement, terminable at pleasure."

"I leave the question to you. I see you do not like to commit yourself."

"My dear Mrs. Rivers, I am only afraid of jumping too eagerly at your tempting offer; you would probably like to consult your aunt, or she would like you to consult her."

"Yes, I ought to pay her that compliment. Well, my dear Miss Wilmot, take your twenty-four hours. I will write to you to-morrow."

* * * * *

"Auntie," said Celia a few hours later, as they sat over the fire, "I met Miss Wilmot to-day. I should like to ask her to luncheon or dinner."

"Yes, to be sure. You need not have stopped to ask me."

"Thank you; but I would not be so rude as to invite any one to your table without first asking your permission."

"Well, my dear, it's as much yours as mine. You pay your share, and a very fair share; but I know you'd like a house of your own, and I don't blame you."

"Later on I think I should; but about Miss Wilmot, do you know she has been left quite unprovided for?"

"You don't mean to say so! And her father a clergyman, a religious man, I suppose. I don't believe in religion that leaves children unprovided for. Why didn't he save and pinch? And I do declare I think a law ought to be made to punish parents who leave their children to poverty and misery when they die."

"Have you any Irish blood, auntie, that you are guilty of such a very rampant Irish bull?" asked Celia, laughing.

"Who—me? No, certainly not. What are you laughing at? Oh, yes, I see; it *was* rather a slip; but any one could see what I mean."

"I should like you to know Miss Wilmot, for I think of asking her to travel with me instead of victimising *you*."

"Travel with you?"

"Yes. You see she must earn her living somehow. Lord Riversdale, I believe, wanted to give her a pension (I think they are distantly related), but she prefers earning to living on charity; so don't you think she would be a nice companion for me?"

Mrs. Twiss frowned slightly, as if thinking hard; then her countenance cleared. "Yes, my dear," she said, "it would be the very thing. She is old enough, and has all the fashionable ways. Then she knows people; above all, she's related to the earl." (There was only one earl for Mrs. Twiss.) "Ask her, by all means. She might come to lunch, for at night, you see, she would be obliged to have a cab, and nothing runs away with money before you know where you are like cabs. We'll have soup, oysters, roast sweetbreads with tomato sauce, a brace of birds, and sweets; in fact, a little, early dinner. I daresay the poor soul is at one of those nasty, cheap boarding-houses and rarely gets a decent meal."

"Thank you, auntie dear; I am glad you like the idea. I will write to Miss Wilmot at once, for I fear she has almost taken another engagement."

"Don't you let her go!" cried Aunt Sarah, with energy. "Where does she live? Can't you wire to her this evening?"

"Oh, I do not think that is necessary," said Celia, surprised at her aunt's eagerness. "I will call to-morrow at eleven. She will not go out before that."

"Tell her to come here, child. You need not make yourself too cheap."

"There can be no question of making one's self cheap between Gertrude Wilmot and me."

"Be as nice as you like; but take my advice, don't spoil her."

So Celia perceived that her point was gained without any of the difficulties she had anticipated. Moreover, she fancied

the motive of her aunt's prompt compliance was not far to seek, and smiled sadly at the associated ideas called up by this bit of divination.

CHAPTER XX.

To remain in London during the dreary process of the suit now proceeding seemed intolerable to Celia. Riversdale and Damer Court were alike impossible to her in her eager desire to escape from the pain of memory and vain regret, while her aunt shocked and wearied her with her scarcely veiled allusions to Lord Riversdale and his appreciation of herself. It was an immense relief to have the companionship of a clear-sighted, sensible woman of the world in a good sense.

There was just that difference between Celia and her new friend which prevented monotony. Miss Wilmot was less imaginative, graver, and much less inclined to variations of mood; the evenness of her temperament was saved from monotony by the interest she took in people and things, in the movements of the day, the politics of the hour.

For the larger half of her life she had been the constant companion of her father—a man of the highest character, strong, capable, clear-sighted. She had inherited much of his nature, and association had increased the likeness and confirmed her practical tendency. There was sufficient difference between her views and those of Celia to give interest to their conversation, and enough sympathy to prevent any real conflict of opinion. She soon became a stay and a comfort to the deserted young wife, who was a little anxious how Aunt Sarah would get on with this new acquisition.

She knew her aunt's tone with anyone whose services could be secured by money, and she rather reluctantly agreed to that relative's cordially expressed proposition that Miss

Wilmot should at once take up her abode in Mandeville Terrace.

The experiment turned out better than Celia expected. Miss Wilmot, though exceedingly quiet and unaffected, was not a person with whom liberties could be taken, and she was protected by the ægis of "the earl's" patronage. Nevertheless, Celia grew very anxious to leave town. She felt that she should be more at rest and freer from the bore of being on guard if she were alone with Gertrude Wilmot.

"And you are going away next week!" she exclaimed to Preston, who had called one grey afternoon to say good-bye. She had seen but little of him since her return to London; indeed, his present visit was due to the reproaches she addressed to him when they had met accidentally in the street a few days previously.

"Yes. I am going to stay with an old college friend of mine, who is both rector and squire of a very picturesque parish on the coast of Cornwall. He is an old bachelor and has a glorious library."

"That sounds very tempting," said Miss Wilmot.

"It does, indeed," echoed Celia. "I am in search of some quiet nook where I may shelter myself 'till this storm be overpast;' and I do not like to put the sea between me and London. Could we find a hermitage in this seaside parish of yours?"

"I am afraid it is quite too remote and secluded, especially in the winter. There are plenty of visitors in the summer, but——"

"But I should much prefer the place without them," cried Celia. "Where is it, and what is its name?"

"It is some two hours beyond Plymouth, and is called St. Ernan's."

"I have heard of it. There are some curious Druidical remains there, are there not?" said Miss Wilmot.

"Exactly. It used to be the most obscure little nook, but

of late the rising tide of summer vacationists have flooded the least-known nooks and crannies, and even St. Ernan's has its season. It is sheltered and sunny, but there is not a creature to speak to except the fisher-people; even my parson-squire friend is almost too eccentric to be available."

"We are a host in ourselves," said Celia. "I suppose I could find an available piano? And as it is a pretty country, I might also find a couple of tranquil horses and ride about with Gertrude for a mistress of equitation. I am less a coward than I used to be. I did a good deal of riding in Algiers on all sorts of animals."

"It is a charming country for riding. There are lots of bridle-roads and points of view inaccessible to carriages. I might be useful, too, as a guide."

"A philosopher and friend, also," said Celia. "I am quite disposed to sit at your feet."

"But once he is under the spell of books, pens, ink, and paper you need not hope for much guidance, Mrs. Rivers," cried Miss Wilmot.

"I suppose not. You will be better engaged."

"I do not think so. What I do think is that you will be dangerous rivals to my work."

"We will promise not to molest you, but if you do not wish to be interrupted, pray say so, and we will not intrude on your solitude."

"Do not think me such a churl. I shall be glad to make all arrangements for you, though I fear you will not stand the place for more than a week."

"I have an idea I shall like it, and as to seclusion, can I be anything but a recluse for the next six months?" she concluded, with a quick sigh.

So it came about that Celia and her new friend vanished from the world of Christmas parties, shooting parties, house parties, nor were they much missed. Mrs. Rivers had been scarcely known in London, so brief had been her appearance

on that monstrous stage, though the extraordinary conduct of her husband had kept her memory living for awhile in the minds of his various acquaintance. Gertrude Wilmot, known to many, was scarcely a member of the great gossip society of pleasure-seekers, and both were well content to be in strict retirement during the painful period of waiting for the decision which would or would not give Celia her freedom.

Mrs. Twiss, however, did not take the same view.

"St. Ernan's!" she almost screamed when Celia mentioned her idea of spending two or three months in that remote retreat. "Where in the world is that?"

"It is a fishing village in Cornwall, a very picturesque, sunny place," said Gertrude.

"And my goodness gracious! What are you going to do with yourselves in such an out-of-the-way corner? That's not the way to gather a circle of friends round you such as you will want by-and-bye," resumed Aunt Sarah, almost angrily. "I declare, Celia, you haven't an ounce of sense."

"I am inclined to agree with you," returned Celia, wearily.

"Why, your proper place is with *me*. I am, in a manner of speaking, like your mother, or, if you would prefer a place of your own, there's No. 27 to be let furnished; it's not so good a house as this, but it's not bad. You and Miss Wilmot could be quite comfortable there; but to run off miles and miles and mope yourself to death where no one, not even the earl, would be able to take a long journey to see you is out of all reason."

"Oh, yes. Riversdale would manage to run down and pay us a visit. I am going to make him my master of the horse."

At which small joke Mrs. Twiss laughed with a great sense of enjoyment, and a discussion ensued which ended in a compromise, Mrs. Twiss becoming more reconciled to the St. Ernan's project, and, on Celia giving a ready promise to return for the Christmas week to keep her aunt company throughout that festive season, complete harmony was established.

"I don't like that fellow Preston," said Aunt Sarah to Gertrude Wilmot, in a confidential tone, one morning, a day or two before Celia and her friend were to start for St. Ernan's. "I believe he is a schemer."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Twiss," exclaimed Gertrude. "He is quite incapable of anything like double dealing."

"Don't you be so sure of that! He sticks pretty close to Mrs. Rivers, and she is so ready to be taken with any kind of cleverness or book-learning that I am sometimes a little uneasy. He is no match for my niece, you must allow, and next time I do want her to be really well settled."

"I do not think Mrs. Rivers will be soon tempted to try the tremendous experiment again. She has had a bitter lesson."

"No matter. I don't wish her to live her life alone."

"Nor I; though I am an old maid, I am no advocate for single blessedness."

"Well, if you are an old maid, it must be your own fault!" said Mrs. Twiss, admiringly; "and I think my niece is lucky to have a person like you for a companion if you will just bear in mind that I shall be cruelly annoyed if she gives that writing fellow a thought, and do your best to back me up. I'll—I'll—that is, you will not find me ungrateful."

"The gratitude ought to be on my side, Mrs. Twiss, for your flattering opinion of me," said Miss Wilmot, laughing at this distinct approach to bribery. "I, too, am fortunate in finding so pleasant a home, even though it is probably but a temporary arrangement."

"Well, yes; I don't suppose it will be very permanent," returned Mrs. Twiss, complacently, while she said to herself, "She's not blind. *She* sees what the earl is after."

* * * * *

The St. Ernan's experiment proved eminently successful. The weather lent itself most obligingly to the scheme. The sun was frequently visible, the air was soft and balmy, and the

old-fashioned hotel, once the residence of a distinguished county family, now ruined and gone, extremely comfortable, even home-like.

The eccentric squire and parson proved not insensible to the charm of his friend's friends, and after awhile absolutely invited them to tea in his famous library. Preston often rode and walked with them, and, Lord Riversdale having accepted the high office of Celia's master of the horse, came down in person to introduce the animals he had selected, and bestowed nearly a week on the pleasant task of starting Celia's stable and exploring the beautiful country round. He expressed the keenest regret at being obliged to leave the earthly paradise of St. Ernan's for a big shooting-party at the house of an old bachelor relative in Yorkshire, after which he was due at home.

"I shall be going to town on the twentieth myself," said Celia. "We have promised to spend Christmas with Aunt Sarah."

"Then *do* come down to Riversdale for New-Year's day," cried the earl, eagerly. "The Damers will be with me, and Dacre and one or two more pleasant people. I should take it as a good omen if you would honour me with the charm of your presence."

"Ah, no; I don't think I can ever bring luck to any one," she replied; "and you cannot imagine how I shrink from the idea of seeing the Court or Riversdale again. Oh, yes, I know it is weak and foolish, but I cannot help it. Later I shall get over it all. I am determined to do so, but now——"

Her voice broke, and she turned away in a fruitless attempt to hide the tears which sprang to her eyes from her companion.

"I wish to God I could atone to you for all you have suffered from the cruelty of the man I blush to call cousin," cried Riversdale, impulsively, as he took and kissed her hand.

"Thank you, thank you heartily for your kind sympathy.

We were always friends, were we not? Just now it is a bad time, but I hope to be more my old self once this dreadful business is finished. I had rather painful letters from Mr. Ridley this morning."

"And you must be moped to death here?"

"No, no, indeed, I am not. Gertrude and I find that time flies. We have plenty of fascinating books and a tolerably good piano. Then Mr. Preston is a delightful companion."

"Oh, he is, is he?" said the earl, in a curious tone.

"He is, indeed. Gertrude and I quite enjoy his society."

It was with no small reluctance that Celia and her companion left their seclusion for the promised visit to Mrs. Twiss. They had a week of feasting on the heaviest Christmas fare, and Mrs. Twiss took Miss Wilmot to a huge pantomime and a burlesque, costly and entrancing performances, in Aunt Sarah's opinion, which her niece's companion could not see every day.

Of course, Mrs. Twiss was obliged to renounce her project of giving several gorgeous dinners, in deference to her niece's desire to avoid mere acquaintances during the present time of trouble, and this deprivation was one of the counts laid to the charge of that delinquent, Derek Rivers. Still, Mrs. Twiss could not quite deny herself the pleasure of inviting an occasional curate to sun himself in the society of her beloved niece, whom she now looked upon as Countess of Riversdale elect.

Gertrude Wilmot was a very observant person, and this quality was intensified by her warm sympathy with Celia. She perceived, through the veil of cheerful good humour in which her friend managed to wrap up her real mood, that Celia was a prey to great depression and an extraordinary degree of nervousness. Both, indeed, were truly glad to find themselves again in their Cornish retreat, and resumed the pleasant monotony of their tranquil lives with a real sense of enjoyment. Celia's spirits were very unequal, however.

Sometimes she talked gaily of the future ; sometimes she was silent and self-absorbed. Gertrude was sorry to think that Preston had made almost all the notes and extracts he needed from the treasures of his old friend's library, and talked of returning to his London abode.

No one seemed to interest and rouse Mrs. Rivers so much as this quiet scholar. Indeed, he talked to her as he rarely did to any other, out of the fulness of his knowledge and experience, with a certainty of being understood and appreciated which he rarely showed.

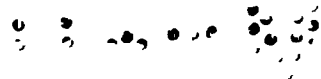
Gertrude felt instinctively that her new friend was oppressed by painful thoughts, memories, and anticipations, and longed to draw her from silent brooding to outspoken confidence, which she felt would be a relief, but how to change this taciturn mood was the difficulty.

"I have heard you call yourself a chatter-box," said Gertrude Wilmot, one wild, rainy, stormy afternoon, which forbid open-air exercise, and they were sitting together over the fire,—one busy with some children's garments for the poorer little ones of the parish schools, and Mrs. Rivers gazing at the fire. The book she had been reading dropped in her lap.

"I have heard you call yourself a chatter-box," resumed Gertrude, after a brief struggle with a bodkin which resisted insertion through a narrow casing ; "and yet you have sat there in absolute silence for nearly forty minutes by the clock."

"Have I?" cried Celia, with a start that displaced her book. "What a miserable companion I must be. I feel quite ashamed of myself. And you are always so delightfully equable, and bright, and patient. Yet you, too, must have many an hour of sad thought, of painful memory ; but you are so strong and sensible. You have done me a great deal of good, Gertrude."

"And you have saved me from a mechanical life, such as I dreaded, at all events, for the present."



"For many a year, I hope. I am not changeable, Gertrude."

"I am sure you are not, but your circumstances will change; your youth, the long future which stretches out before you, foreshadow endless possibilities."

"I suppose they do. Oh, I hope they do. Do you know there are times when I find life almost unbearable, and again I dream of a happy, enjoyable existence: I am so weak, so variable."

"You mean so natural, Mrs. Rivers."

"Don't call me Mrs. Rivers; I hate it."

"It is not to be wondered at if you do," exclaimed Gertrude.

"No, no, it's not that," said Celia, quickly; "I never wish to be called by any other, but it sounds formal, and cold, and unfriendly."

"Considering our respective positions——" began Gertrude, with a smile.

"There is nothing in that," interrupted Celia, impatiently; "you were always called by my husband—my late husband," she corrected herself with a bitter laugh—"always called Gertrude, and you called him Derek, so I will always be Celia to you. Don't you like the name of Derek? I do. There is a pleasant roughness about it, a kind of strength. Oh, so like himself, is it not, Gertrude?"

"It is; but I never thought of it before."

"I am so deplorably weak and contemptible."

Celia rose and wandered to the window, where she stood gazing out at the fierce, foaming storm-tossed waters.

"Sometimes I am better and stronger, but lately I have been wretched. I am always tormenting myself and reproaching myself for not having known how to manage Derek. It has been so bad for him, though he was so resolute and imperious. I was unkind not to spare him the irritation that drove him to wreck us both. He did love me once, Gertrude;

he did, indeed. I tremble and feel faint when I recall those first happy days. You do not know how tender he could be. How did he come to change? It began as soon as we returned to London and he saw how deficient I was compared with Lady Mary and the women he had been accustomed to. Then he used to correct me and I tried so hard to bear it well, but I could not. He used to see my annoyance and attempt to soothe me as you would a wayward child. The sort of admiring eagerness that seemed to inspire him faded into a kind of judicial tone. I suppose his illusions disappeared and he saw me as I was. I ought to have borne it all. Perhaps I should have been miserable anyhow. You don't know how maddening his air of utter superiority was. Yet now and then he seemed to love me. Then again gleams of the contempt he had for the class from which I sprang roused a counter contempt for the littleness which prevented him from seeing that I, my real ego, was not unworthy his love and respect. That spurred me on to remind him of the material advantages I was fortunate in being able to bestow on him. That was an awful mistake. Yet—yet, Gertrude, if I were to go through it all again, I fear I should say the same. Fear! Do I fear? I am not certainly a Clara Vere de Vere, but I never could grovel at any man's feet. If I ever could, it would be at Derek's, for I love him still in a strange, unreasoning way. I long for a sight of his eyes, for the sound of his voice. To compel his respect, to master him, for something tells me that my maturer self will be stronger than he. How my heart aches for him. It is by no means the better, nobler part of me that clings to him so passionately, but it is a very overpowering weakness. Yet I would not, if I could, undo these measures which I have taken for a divorce. It is only right to give him the chance of marrying this woman who has dared so much to be his. He will love her far, far better than he ever loved me. She has sacrificed for him and she is utterly dependent on him. Oh, Gertrude, how I have

poured out my troubles to you. What a tirade about self I have inflicted upon you."

"You have interested me profoundly," said Miss Wilmot, in a low tone (she had dropped her work long before), "and I can sympathise with you, for experience tells me how cruel such partings are. But I have survived my sorrow and taken up life again. Life is inexhaustible. You will find it so, Celia."

"Yes, I believe I shall. It is too precious a gift to be thrown aside, because it has edges so keen that they sometimes cut through the outer husks and shells which defend our souls and pierce to the inmost heart's core. Yes, Gertrude, this bitter cup shall not kill me. It has only stopped my growth for a little while. I am still young enough to regain vitality and elasticity."

She stopped, for a waiter entered with a salver on which lay several letters. Mrs. Rivers selected hers, exclaiming:

"What a large mail for the afternoon post. Why, here is one from Gage, my aunt's maid. She says her dear mistress has taken cold. So she said in her letter of Tuesday," observed Celia, interrupting herself, then continuing to read, "'We have persuaded her to see the doctor, who thinks it is a mild attack of bronchitis, but she was very bad last night, and if she is not better to-morrow, she says, with her love, would you mind coming up to stay, as she would not like to die without seeing you. She is that low; those are her own words.' Poor, dear auntie, of course I will go. But she is so easily alarmed about herself. I daresay to-morrow's report will be greatly improved."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE next morning's post brought no further news of Aunt Sarah. This made Celia anxious. She refused to believe that "no news was good news."

"You say your aunt is easily alarmed about herself," urged Miss Wilmot.

"She is; and I should not be so uneasy if she complained of anything but bronchitis; but she was once dangerously ill with that, and she is older and much stouter now."

"I think you may safely conclude she is better, or they would have been sure to let you know. Come! it is quite fine to-day. Let us take a brisk walk along the cliffs. You cannot have any further news till this evening."

Returning from their bath of fresh air, a waiter met them in the hall and handed a telegram to Mrs. Rivers, who hastily tore it open.

"Come at once!" was all it said. This was signed by her aunt's maid.

"I must lose no time. What train can I catch?" cried Celia, addressing the waiter.

"I fear there is no train up after two-thirty, ma'am; and you could not catch that."

Then there was eager search in Bradshaw, where it was found that Mrs. Rivers could not get off till the next morning at nine o'clock, and then it was only a chance if she could catch the London express at Plymouth.

"It is a cruel delay!" ejaculated Celia. "You will come with me, Gertrude, will you not?"

"Yes; certainly. I should not like you to go alone."

"My poor aunt! How impatient she will be till I arrive!"

"Mrs. Twiss seemed to be in excellent health. I trust the fright you have had will be the worst part of the business."

"I hope so, but I cannot help fearing the worst."

The rest of the day was spent in preparations for their early start.

The morning broke dull and drizzling. The sea was calm, but shrouded in mist, and it seemed to Celia that St. Ernan's had hid its face in an ominous fashion.

The London express was two minutes behind time, and Celia with her friend just succeeded in catching it. The rest of the way was weary work, as neither Celia nor her companion was disposed to speak, while their thoughts and anticipations were far too keenly occupied to permit of sleep.

It was dark when they arrived at Paddington, and the distance thence to Mandeville Terrace was soon accomplished.

"How is she?" were Celia's first words to her aunt's "right-hand" man when he opened the door.

"A shade better, 'm. Sir Octavius Pierce was here about an hour ago. He says she was holding her ground. Dinner is quite ready, if you wish to——"

"Oh! let me see my aunt. I do not want anything until I see her," interrupted Celia.

"Here is Gage, 'm!" returned the servant, looking towards the stairs, down which the lady's-maid was descending.

Her report was more encouraging, and Celia followed her to the sick-room. Her hopes had risen during the short transit, but fell low indeed when she saw the great change which had taken place in her aunt's aspect and heard her laboured breathing. She was quite clear in her mind, however, and stretched out her hand, whispering in gasps her joy at seeing Celia.

"Knew you would come," she repeated. "You love your old auntie? Eh! dear?"

Celia held back her tears with some difficulty as she kissed

the hot cheek and smoothed the feverish hand that lay in hers until the patient dropped off into an uneasy sleep.

"She is far, far worse than I expected to find her," said Celia, when she joined Miss Wilmot at dinner, of which neither was inclined to partake. "Of course, I know nothing of sickness, but I feel my aunt is *very* ill."

"I should think she had a good fund of health and strength to draw upon. The doctor's opinion, too, is encouraging, as it was reported."

"I earnestly hope her strength may hold out," returned Celia, adding, with a slight smile, "it would vex her, poor dear, to die before she knew I was a free woman."

"We cannot wonder at that. Now, my dear Mrs. Rivers, as the people in this house must have their hands very full, I propose that your maid and I should put up at a quiet little hotel of which the butler told me, and I have sent round to secure rooms. I will come here quite early to do what I can for you, and I do hope you will get some sleep."

"That is well thought of. As to sleep, I will not go to bed to-night. I don't suppose I can be of the least assistance to the nurse, but it will comfort my aunt to see me when she wakes; and oh, Gertrude, do *not* call me Mrs. Rivers. It sounds so cold in this time of trouble. Call me Celia."

It was already late, and soon after Miss Wilmot went to her hotel, and Celia, putting on a dressing-gown, took her station in the sick-room.

* * * * *

It is not necessary to follow the rapid progress of the disease. In spite of her robust seeming, Mrs. Twiss was a bad subject for such an attack. Her heart was weakened by increasing obesity, and she had laughed at all warnings to be careful as to diet. The third day after her arrival Celia saw her kindly-natured aunt pass peacefully away at the last, her stiffening hand clasped in her own. She had wandered a good deal during the day, falling into a state half sleep, half

insensibility, from time to time. Then came the period of silent watching, when there was no more to be done and the mourners waited for the coming of the great deliverer. Mrs. Twiss lay with her eyes closed, and Celia did not expect to see them open again, when the lids were suddenly lifted, her eyes meeting Celia's with a look of brightness and recognition.

"You are there still," she murmured. "You'll be tired, dear." Then her eyes closed and she never spoke again.

It was Celia's first experience of death, and it struck her heart more with a sense of awe, of solemn harmony, than the abject terror with which it affects some.

"Death is no curse," she thought, as she gazed on the quiet face of the dead and remarked that the "mighty king" had bestowed upon Aunt Sarah's homely face a beauty and dignity life had never given and could never give. "It is permission to rest after the burden and heat of day rather than a punishment for the trespass of our first parents. If we come to life again in a state of sinless happiness, such as no human imagination can conceive, and know those beloved ones who have preceded us, it must, indeed, be bliss. Of the other state! Ah! I never believed in *that*. It is too horrible, and, since I have read and thought more, it seems an insult to the Almighty Father, wherever and whatever He may be, to give it a moment's credence. Good-bye, dear auntie. I thank God I was some little comfort to you at the last. You have indeed left me alone."

A busy and depressing time ensued. Mrs. Twiss had left her niece residuary legatee and executrix. A large part of the deceased's property went to a relative of her husband, but enough remained to be a considerable addition to Celia's fortune. Then there were legacies to pay, and all the various matters which attend the demise of a person blest with "filthy lucre" to bequeath,—furniture to be sold and the house to be disposed of. Mr. Ridley, who managed every-

thing for his ex-ward, was fairly stunned by Celia's lavish generosity in carrying out the provisions of her aunt's will. "My dear young lady, if I may still call you so, you do not seem to know the value of money. It is a sacred charge placed in your hands by the mercy of Providence, and you should guard it conscientiously."

"I know that, Mr. Ridley; I ought not to waste it. But do you call it waste if I pay over sums of one, three, and four hundred pounds to clergymen or servants who will never have such a chance again, free of succession duty, and add a little present to those whom I know served my dear aunt well? I do not get through more than two-thirds of my own income, so why should I hold my hand?"

"Ah, well! It's easy to see that you will be a prey to impostors of every description," exclaimed the lawyer, impatiently, "but I have done my duty."

"As you always have to the benefit of those who leave their affairs in your hands," returned Celia, with a caressing smile, against which Ridley was by no means proof.

All through this wearisome time Miss Wilmot was not only a comfort, but of real assistance to Celia. She was a clear-sighted, capable woman not unacquainted with business, and earned a high opinion from Celia's shrewd lawyer.

Before the multifarious matters connected with her inheritance were arranged, and early in June, Celia's petition for divorce came on. This was in her eyes "the abomination of desolation." She had awaited it with an indescribable, sickening sense of repulsion, living in strict seclusion in her aunt's house, and steadily refusing to see anyone but her husband's relatives.

After all, the trial was less terrible than Celia anticipated. Captain Rivers made no defence, and the evidence was clear and concise. It proved that on a certain night in August of the previous year Mrs. Forrest, wife of Major Forrest, of the native cavalry, fled from her husband's bungalow to Captain Rivers's

quarters, where she remained. Major Forrest left the station, and some weeks after his wife went to the hills, whither Rivers followed her. The case was stated with so much reserve in the papers that very few not personally interested in the actors noticed it. The case only lasted a few days and was terminated by a decree *nisi* in favour of Mrs. Rivers.

Lady Mary Damer came to town to be with Celia at this trying time, and proved a welcome support, for, though she preserved a steady front during the few days occupied by the case, her friends were well aware how great an effort it cost her to keep calm and converse as usual without once alluding to the subject uppermost in the minds of all. Only the afternoon on which she was informed that her petition was granted and that she was a free woman she pleaded the ordinary excuse of a headache, and kept her room. Next day she had a long interview with her solicitor, and then the whole matter seemed over. Dining with Lady Mary, Mr. Damer and Lord Riversdale, she so far took them into her confidence that she said :

“I have been making plans with Gertrude Wilmot this morning, and I should like to talk to you about them if you will kindly listen. First, and before everything, I want to leave England for the remainder of this year and part of next. Then I may be able to decide many things—as to where I shall live and——”

“Yes,” interrupted Riversdale ; “but do not be in a hurry. Things may be very different next year.”

“They may,” she returned, dreamily, with a far-away look in her sad eyes. “Now, I know Italy pretty well, and France, and, although I do not feel especially tempted to go there, I think I should like some months in Germany and try to learn the language. The hot weather we might spend in the Bavarian highlands, and stay awhile in Vienna, Munich, Prague, Dresden, and other towns in the late autumn and winter. After, the deluge ! But I will keep you posted up in our

doings. Gertrude likes the idea. She was at school in Germany, and prefers it to France."

"Oh, it will do as well as any other place, but I fancy you will be bored there. I will come and look you up occasionally."

"Yes, pray do. You are very good to me, Riversdale."

"We are all anxious about you, Mrs. Rivers, and earnestly hope there are good days to come for you and plenty of them," added Damer.

Celia made a little, quick motion of her hand and tried to speak, then paused for a moment, and resumed.

"Mr. Ridley tells me that all the business relating to my aunt's will is so far settled that my presence is not necessary here. The house is already in the hands of agents, and I propose to leave next week."

"So soon!" was the general exclamation.

"It is not too soon, Gertrude, and I had decided to go and made all preparations, only the question of *where* was unsettled."

"I think it is the best thing you can do, only do not get into too wandering a habit of life," said Lady Mary. "Come back to us soon."

Celia was struggling to restrain her tears, and could not reply. Soon after she bid them good-bye, and it was many months before they all dined together again.

CHAPTER XXII.

It was late in March of the year following Aunt Sarah's death, and Lady Mary was still in her beloved country home, which she found more and more attractive each year. Personally, she never wished to leave it for London, but she was

far too mindful of her children's interests to neglect society, which can repay neglect so amply in its own coin.

Luncheon was in progress when Lord Riversdale was announced and hailed with a joyous welcome by his niece, now promoted to the school-room presided over by a serious governess and dinner with mother at one-thirty.

"Why, Riversdale, I thought you were at Trevallan?"

"I came back yesterday, and I am going up to town tomorrow. I had a letter from Gertrude Wilmot. They are in town."

"Yes, for some days. It is sooner than I expected. I had a long letter from Celia this morning. Here it is. Won't you have your luncheon first?" seeing him open it.

"Thanks, I have lunched."

And he proceeded to read as follows, with deep attention:

"MY DEAR LADY MARY,—I wonder you care to hear from me. I have been such a good-for-nothing as a correspondent, while you have been good for so much, but as I *hope* you *do* care a little bit to know what I am about, I will tell you. We have been barely a fortnight in town and I have found a house. It is small, with tolerably large rooms, and is in C—— Square, which begins to look very green and pretty. I am not going to put the furnishing into the hands of any 'eminent' firm. I want to do it by degrees myself. It will be interesting work, and we have picked up such numbers of pretty, curious, quaint things in our rambles that I seem only to want ordinary, useful furniture. I find I am glad to be once more in London, for I dreaded returning, and it is comforting to feel the taste for a settled home again developing itself. I wonder how many strata of lives exist within one human soul? Is it a sign of grand vitality? or of a shallow, fickle nature? Whichever it may be, I am infinitely glad to wish for things and have a degree of satisfaction in obtaining them. I am so weary of indifference, and I hate unhappiness.

How can people nurse their grief? It cannot be very bitter grief or they would be too glad to throw it away or smother it. I do hope I shall be happy in my new home and forget. Shall you be in town soon? and where is Lord Riversdale? I thought he would have come back to Germany before we left. How nice it will be to have you and Mr. Damer and Riversdale to dine with me once more. You must help me to organise my household, dear Lady Mary. I want nothing grand or large. Comfort, prettiness, completeness—these three embody my ideas. I do not feel as lonely as I expected I should. Gertrude Wilmot is a tower of strength. I cannot tell you what she has been to me—a real staff of life; sound, sustaining, wheaten bread. None of your sweet cake, all the sugar and candy of sentimental sympathy. Just the sort of woman to deal with hysterical patients and administer cold douches of common sense. I think she helped me to see that I have been unreasonable and ungracious to those who have shown me true kindness, so I want every one to give me plenary absolution, especially you, dear Lady Mary, whose charming letters I have left unanswered and whose kind invitations I have rejected. I am going to begin again to be nice and pleasant, kind and prettily behaved—a new creature, in short. I wonder if I have always been disagreeable, and I wonder if *all* men would find me intolerable. I believe I get on better with women. I feel great curiosity on this subject. I hope I shall see you soon, dear Lady Mary. We shall have such a nice, long talk. How are the children? Shall they be in town with you? I should like to see them again. I shall find them grown out of my memory, I suppose. Love and kisses to them, and kindest regards to Mr. Damer.

“Affectionately yours,

“CELIA RIVERS.”

Lord Riversdale read the letter slowly, and then turned back to read some parts over a second time before returning it to its rightful owner.

"She has never spoken so freely of her own position before," said Lady Mary.

"She has been singularly reticent," remarked Riversdale, "but you can see from that letter how desperately hard hit she has been. I am glad there's no chance of my coming across Derek. I don't think I could control myself if I met him. He has almost broken that poor girl's heart. Thank God, she has a proper spirit, and I hope she'll find some honest fellow to atone to her for all *he* has made her suffer."

"I would not suggest the idea of such consolation soon," said Lady Mary, quietly.

The earl reddened. "Why do you imagine I should?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, because it will take some time to accustom her to the idea that she is no longer a wife."

"Oh! pooh, nonsense! It is more than three months since the decree absolute was given. She will have half a dozen offers by the end of the season." There was a short pause.

"Why did you not return to Germany, as Celia seems to have expected you would?"

"Ah! well; Gertrude was rather officious. She said, in her blunt way, that after travelling with them in the Bavarian Highlands it would be wiser not to come back for the present. I thought she might possibly be right. It would never do to make a mistake of that kind."

"Certainly not, and until the final decree it was necessary to be cautious." She stopped abruptly, as if she checked some word or words.

"What were you going to say, Mary?"

"Nothing of any importance."

"I rather fancy I can guess. You need not waste your words of wisdom upon me, however."

"It would be wiser of you to listen," said Lady Mary, gravely.

A little more talk of their respective plans and engagements, and Lady Mary put on her hat and accompanied her brother to the lodge, where his horse awaited him, and, having given sundry messages for Celia, bid him good-bye.

* * * * *

From this period, in the occupation and interest afforded by making and beautifying a home for herself and the companion who suited her so well, Celia dated the commencement of a new and more healthy life. Her eagerness for enjoyment, her enthusiastic belief in possible perfection, her fiery indignation with wrong and injustice, had all toned down, but there was always a subdued animation in her conversation which gave it an indescribable charm.

One of her first visitors when she still waited in her rooms at one of the great Northumberland Avenue hotels until her own house was ready was Lady Yoddrell.

That very business-like personage approached with some trepidation, though outwardly as certain as ever of her own infallibility. In all her match-making experiences she had never made so disastrous a failure as in the Derek Rivers case. She was therefore feverishly anxious to retrieve her character by contriving another and a much more brilliant alliance for the deserted wife. Indeed, she had a pale hope of catching the young Duke of Bamborough, grandson of the formidable peeress who, in the days that now seemed so far away, had presented Celia at the first and only drawing-room she had attended.

“Well, my dear Mrs. Rivers,” she exclaimed, when they had exchanged greetings, and her ladyship perceived with much satisfaction that Celia was frankly civil and free from any coldness or restraint in manner, “I am delighted you are going to settle among us. I hear you have taken Maurice Bryden’s house, a very charming abode, but I should have thought rather too small for you. How wonderfully that man has got on! I remember him a scrubby little nobody, with

long hair and a shabby coat, and now he has built himself a lovely house, a perfect palace, my dear, out near Holland Park. Now, you must take a good and decided position. A little judicious action in the first couple of months will soon settle *that*. Of course, you will go to the first drawing-room after Easter. Then every one will call, for people take a great interest in you. I assure you they do. You must give some very *recherché* little dinners, too, and have them mentioned in all the society papers. I could manage that; then——”

“Many thanks for your kind consideration, my dear Lady Yoddrell,” said Celia, laughing, “but I am not without plans of my own. I am afraid you will think me frivolous, but my chief object is to enjoy myself, an object which will in no way be advanced by attending the drawing-room; so I have no intention of favouring her Majesty with my presence. I hope, however, to have many little dinners for numbers of pleasant people whom I have met abroad, who are in town and will be for awhile, and I feel like the many new companies advertised from day to day. I have power to add to their number whenever chance throws a worthy associate in my way.”

Lady Yoddrell looked at her in some surprise. This was a different creature from the rather hoydenish girl of some years back who was full of life and daring—a daring at which she was half frightened. This was a woman who knew how far she could go, and had self-knowledge and self-control enough not to go an inch beyond.

“Still, my dear Mrs. Rivers, London is a *terra incognita* to you, and I hope you will always remember that I am at your service whenever you desire hints or help.”

“Many thanks, Lady Yoddrell; you are very good.”

“And so Gertrude Wilmot is living with you? Very lucky for her.”

“And still more lucky for me.”

“I’m glad to hear it, I’m sure. I must say she always

seemed to me a very domineering, self-assured young person. Then Lord Riversdale and Lady Mary spoiled her dreadfully. I always liked the younger sister, who married Colonel Something or other, and went to India, best. Very reprehensible of the vicar to dabble in speculation; unbecoming his cloth, too. They say Riversdale is looking out for a wife."

"I do hope he will find a good and a charming one," cried Celia. "I wonder he never found one before."

"Don't you know the reason why? It was that Mrs. Fairfax who kept him single."

"No; I never heard of her."

"Is it possible! Everybody knew *that* story. She was an actress with a wretched husband. Riversdale went off with her when he was quite young; fortunately, the husband from spite never would divorce her, so they lived on together—*sub rosa*. She seems to have been a very decent sort of woman, and rather a god-send to Riversdale, kept him out of complications with other women, and from riotous living. Latterly, they were less together, I believe; but he was awfully cut up when she died about two years ago. At any rate, he is——"

"Lord Riversdale!" announced Luigi, Celia's Italian courier, who had been with her and her aunt during their continental wanderings, and was now in her service.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," cried Lady Yoddrell, with much cordiality. "We were just talking of you. How are the Damers? I hear he is a perfect resurrection, compared to what he was three years ago. Now, I must go. I have been paying dear Mrs. Rivers a visitation. Oh, by the way, will you both come and dine with me on Thursday week, the twenty-ninth? I am going to ask one or two people who are dying to know Mrs. Rivers, Sir Gerald Aylmer especially."

"I shall be most happy," said Celia.

"So shall I, if I am in town."

"I know you never stay long in London. Be sure you tell me if you do go away ; then I can fill your place. I never have more than twelve and cannot throw away an invitation. When may I come to see your new house, Mrs. Rivers?"

"Whenever it is fit to be seen, Lady Yoddrell."

"What a diplomatic speech! Good-morning, my dear! Good-bye, Lord Riversdale!"

"How long has that meddling busy-body been boring you?"

"Oh, not so very long ; and how are you? I am so glad to see you, Riversdale."

"You are an angel to say so."

"Thank you. Would you like to come and see my new home? I am just going to ascertain how the work is progressing."

"I have to confess to greater audacity than even Lady Yoddrell can boast. I have gone over the house already. Can you forgive me?"

"Yes ; of course I do."

"I had no idea you had absolutely bought it, Celia. Haven't you been rather hasty?"

"I think not. Mr. Ridley thinks it rather a bargain, and in that situation——"

"I wish you had consulted me," said Lord Riversdale, taking a turn to and fro and then leaning his shoulder against the mantel-piece.

"Why are you annoyed about it?"

"Because—because I want you to preside over *my* home. There, I can keep silent no longer, Celia, and I fancy you must know pretty well what my wishes were."

"When you were with us in Munich last autumn it did dawn upon me that, that you were rather fond of me," she returned, growing pale ; "but I also thought you understood I could not entertain the idea of marriage for a long time to come, and so you did not return."

"Yes, I did understand you thought it too soon to talk of marriage, but I did not lose hope. That was six months ago. You have had time enough for consideration. Is it to be yes or no, Celia?"

She did not answer.

"The fact is," he resumed, "I have been more or less in love with you since the first day I met you. I envied Derek his incomparable luck, but I don't think I should have murdered him for your sake. Since he left you I have had no other hope or desire but to win you. I can't help thinking we'd have a first-rate time together. You are such a plucky, sensible little woman, I am awfully in love with you; upon my soul, I am."

Celia was silent for a moment, and then, in a hesitating fashion:

"It is very good of you to care about me, Riversdale, but I am rather sorry, for I do not feel disposed to marry anyone or care about anyone. It seems horrible to think of any other man when my first, my real husband, is alive."

"Well, Celia, I really thought you had too much common sense to hesitate for such a reason. I should have imagined you too sound a Protestant to fancy there was anything sacramental in marriage. It is a legal undertaking, and the law has set you free. Derek is married by this time. Why should you condemn yourself to a lonely life for the sake of a superstitious idea about vows and duty?"

"Do not credit me with anything so high-minded!" exclaimed Celia, with a sad little smile; "I cannot claim to be guided by any principle, only by feeling, impulse. I suppose, if I ever fall in love with any man, my scruples will melt away into thin air."

"Oh, I know you don't love *me*, but perhaps if you tried, you might. I'm not a bad fellow, Celia (you see I am obliged to praise myself), and Riversdale is not a bad place for a home. You could do whatever you liked, for, as far as I can

see, you are generally right about things. Then you'd give Derek the severest blow you could inflict."

"Do you think *that* would recommend your suggestion to me? Do you think me so mean as to find any satisfaction in vexing Derek? in punishing him because he could not love me? He did, at first, and I suppose it was his duty to pretend he did after. I am rather glad he did not. I should soon have seen through the pretence and been even more miserable than I was. Now the pain is passing away. Oh, dear Riversdale, do not talk to me of love or marriage. I have no patience to listen, and I do not think I should suit you one bit nor you me. Do put me out of your head."

"I am a blockhead to have spoken so soon! I have hurt my own cause!" cried the earl, and there was a tone of pain in his voice. "Pray, forget I was such a hasty idiot. Take me back into the degree of favour you used to show me. I don't promise to give up hope, but I'll wait and watch the 'signs of the times' for a considerable period before I trouble you again. Don't banish me."

"You would be a great loss to me, I assure you," she said, kindly; "let us forget all about this, this outbreak, and begin again."

She held out her hand, which Riversdale took and kissed.

"Thank you!" he exclaimed; "you will see I shall keep within bounds and behave prettily."

"You have always been so good to me I should be grieved to lose you," said Celia, softly, with moist eyes, whereat Lord Riversdale took heart again, and, releasing her hand, immediately changed the subject.

"I am a good deal taken with your house," he began. "You'll make it a paradise of prettiness, I foresee. That big room on the entrance floor, which was Bryden's studio, would make a capital billiard-room."

"Oh, no; I intend that for my own particular den. The raised skylight will allow of a lovely group of palms in the

centre, and, as the outlook is far from pleasant, the absence of side windows is an advantage."

They talked for awhile of Celia's new home quite confidentially till Miss Wilmot came in from a morning of shopping, when Lord Riversdale took leave in a cheerful and unembarrassed fashion that gave rise to no suspicions in Gertrude's mind. Celia, too, banished the little scene from her memory, and applied herself so energetically to the fascinating task of furnishing that another month saw her and her companion installed in their new residence, while the cards of visitors soon overflowed the receptacles appointed for them.

This was the beginning of a pleasant time. At last Celia's wounds were closing, and the buoyancy of youth began to return to her.

Lady Mary was struck by the change in her manner, style, taste, even in her expression. A profound quiet seemed to have settled down upon her, out of which she occasionally flashed into bright talk. She was, however, always natural, always quite real, and moderate in all things. Her house was comfortable and charming to the eye, but costliness was not its characteristic. Some of the ornaments—the old silver of her table service—were very valuable, and her few pictures very choice. The same with her dress and equipage. Her whole environment was elegant, but absolutely free from extravagance.

"Mrs. Rivers must be saving a lot of money," observed Mr. Damer to his wife, in one of the rare *tête-à-têtes* they enjoyed when in London.

"I suppose so. I am glad to see she has no trace of purse pride, but I am not sure that she saves much. I fancy she gives away a good deal."

"Does Gertrude say so?"

"No. Gertrude is silent as the grave about her friend, but some little indications have suggested that Celia helps the poor, especially the poor gentry, a good deal."

"She will be considerably imposed upon."

"Possibly. Riversdale fumes a good deal about that possibility."

"He interests himself a good deal about the deserted one."

"He does," said Lady Mary, with emphatic agreement, and then the conversation was interrupted by a visitor.

Before the middle of July, Celia found herself surprisingly well known and popular in society. First, her wealth was greatly exaggerated; next, her intimacy with Lady Mary Damer, who stood on very high ground, indeed, gave her a certain prestige; lastly, her indifference to all social success, to everything, in short, except what gave her and her faithful ally, Gertrude Wilmot, genuine pleasure, gave her an independence which made her position extremely strong. Soon every one wanted to go to her quiet, unpretending but admirable little dinners, and her Wednesday evenings and invitations poured in in an increasing tide. But Mrs. Rivers managed to keep free of the overwhelming rush in which so many are swamped during the season by steadily refusing dances, late receptions, and all "big things." Celia managed to live a fairly rational life. Thanks to her friendship with Preston, a goodly sprinkling of literary and artistic people leavened the rank and fashion to be met with at her house, while numerous younger sons and impecunious lordlings hung upon her smiles and gracious words, watching their chances of winning her favour with eagerness.

It was a pleasant life, and Gertrude Wilmot was exceedingly grateful to Providence for giving her so happy a home, even if it were but temporary, for she always looked forward to the day when Celia's cure would be completed by her acceptance of some suitable and sympathetic partner who would fill the place left vacant by her faithless husband.

In her own mind she had settled that Preston was the man most suited to be Celia's life comrade. What his wishes on the subject were she had no doubt. Of Celia she was not so

sure. At all events, if she were not attracted to him, she showed not the slightest preference for anyone else.

Meanwhile, time rolled easily and pleasantly on, and no event worthy of record broke the even tenor of their way.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Two years and a half of tranquillity had passed over Celia's fair head, and she had become a well-known figure in London society. Lord Riversdale still hung about her, but always on terms of purest friendship, and all things seemed likely to continue indefinitely in the same pleasant routine. Yet great changes were at hand. One afternoon, midway the season, Lord Riversdale presented himself at tea-time, accompanied by a tall, bony, very much embrowned man, with high cheek bones, dark hair, and shaggy eyebrows, overhanging grave, almost pathetic eyes, whom he presented to Celia as Dr. Maclean.

"An old friend of ours, eh, Gertrude?" he added to Miss Wilmot, who was pouring out tea.

Celia noticed that her friend flushed "rosy red," and then grew pale as she held out her hand, saying,—

"Yes, indeed, a friend long unseen."

"We thought Maclean had cut England altogether," resumed Riversdale. "It seems he has been exploring and doctoring, and now he is going to adopt London as his dwelling-place."

"Yes, after much knocking about fortune has been a little kind to me at last, so I am going to take her while she's in the humour and see if I can establish a practice in the great city. That was always my ambition. I hardly dare hope you remember my confiding those dreams of mine to you in the dear old days," said Maclean to Gertrude.

"Yes," I remember them," she returned, with a smile and a sigh, as she held out a cup of tea to him.

He sat down beside her and they began to talk in a subdued tone.

"Maclean is the son of our old Riversdale doctor," explained the earl to Celia. "He was our playfellow in the old days. Then he went off as a ship's surgeon to seek his fortune, and we have never seen him since. He used to be Gertrude's special cavalier."

"Indeed!" returned Celia, looking with interest at the two now deep in conversation. "He is rather picturesque."

"He dined with me last night and told me some of his adventures. He is a good 'raconteur.' He is in treaty with some old fellow in the Bloomsbury quarter for a practice."

"Ah!" exclaimed Celia, in a tone of apprehension.

"Just so," rejoined Riversdale, with a sagacious nod and a knowing look.

Celia laughed merrily, but the suspicion thus suggested never left her mind, and, indeed, it was soon fulfilled. After a few weeks of frequent visits and dinners together—for Celia was liberal of her invitations and found Maclean an amusing and interesting companion—Gertrude informed her friend with some hesitation and smiling at her own embarrassment that she had accepted her old admirer, who had left his home because of the intolerable pain of being "so near and yet so far" from the object of his ardent affection who was beyond his reach. Here, then, was the explanation of Gertrude's celibacy, though few were aware how many good offers she had rejected.

"Alan seems to have made some money," concluded Gertrude, "and has agreed to take the house as well as the practice of the man he proposes to succeed."

"What! in Bloomsbury?" cried Celia; "that will be terribly out of the way."

"Very likely. That does not matter in the least."

"Gertrude, I really believe you very far gone," said Celia, laughing, and they fell into a delightful talk of past, present, and future.

Then came a most interesting interlude of preparation, buying of furniture, arranging of the new home, and a battle on the bride-elect's side against the lavish generosity of her friend, who, with true unselfishness, kept silence respecting the dismay with which she looked forward to her own loneliness when deprived of Gertrude's most congenial companionship.

It was a very quiet wedding, but without a drawback. No home, no loving parent to leave. The expression of serene happiness on the faces of the newly wedded pair seemed an assurance of a blissful future, as Celia thought, "These had come through great tribulations to a peace passing all understanding."

She was surprised at the emotion shown by the bride when they parted, for Gertrude was not at all demonstrative, and yet she thanked her hostess with tears and broken words for the happy days she owed to her.

"Do take her away with you," she whispered to Lady Mary. "She feels my loss awfully. It is not my conceit; I know it. Do take her away."

"That is easier said than done, but I will try."

To Lady Mary's surprise, Celia at once accepted the invitation, and then, at Riversdale's suggestion, they drove down to dine at Richmond. Next day Lady Mary and her "favoured guest" went down to Damer Court and so postponed Celia's evil day.

* * * * *

A month at Damer Court went quickly over. On the whole, however, its effect was not so cheering as Lady Mary hoped and expected. The familiar scenes recalled her brief married happiness and the beginning of her troubles too vividly. She kept her depression very carefully to herself,

and the only person who perceived it was Preston, who spent a few days with his friends during her stay.

The day after her return to town she spent with Mrs. McLean, glad to escape from her own silent house. Almost every one had left town or were going to leave it. Her pleasant political and gossipy men friends were "dispersed abroad and given to the moors," and her own plans for autumn and winter were formless and void. She was too warmly sympathetic, however, not to be brightened up by the sight of her ex-companion's happy home and restful life.

"I suppose, dear, you have had a delightful expedition to the Land of Cakes," said Celia. "Why, Gertrude, you are looking years younger," she added, involuntarily, as she looked into Gertrude's smiling eyes. "It is an ill-bred speech, I fear; but, there, I cannot unsay it."

"Pray, do not," said Gertrude. "I fancy that for an elderly couple we are absurdly youthful. Wait till you see Alan. He is like 'the flowers that bloom in the spring.' I wish truth would permit me to be equally complimentary to you, but, Celia dear, you are *not* looking as bright and blooming as I could wish."

"Oh, that is because I have a slight cold; nothing worth speaking of."

Then followed a delightful couple of hours, during which the friends overhauled the house from kitchen to garret, both loving the interior life heartily in all its ramifications. Before they had well accomplished this delightful task and a discussion on some proposed slight changes in the already much-arranged furniture, Dr. Maclean returned, and they sat down to a cheerful little dinner, whereat the doctor proved himself to be a first-rate "*raconteur*" and a man of keen observation.

How silent, how still, how empty Celia's own charming home seemed to her when she returned to it! "I shall never be able to live here alone," she thought, as her maid left her

with a reading-lamp and a book. "I must seriously look out for a companion. May I be guided aright and not select some whited sepulchre who will fasten upon me and cost me agonies to dislodge. I believe I should get on best with a man companion, but the cost would be too great."

* * * * *

The week which followed was the dreariest Celia had ever spent, always excepting that following Derek's desertion, and that was terrible rather than dreary. Now, she felt too lonely to settle to any occupation, even to putting her house in order. Everyone was out of town save Gertrude, and Celia's kindly, considerate sympathy forbid her intruding too often on a couple so intensely happy in each other's society.

It had been a chill, drizzling day. Celia had really begun to give directions as to putting aside and covering up the innumerable ornaments and decorations of her pleasant rooms, and had written a long letter to Lady Mary; so after luncheon, for which she had no appetite, she sat down by a wood-fire with a book, feeling weary and averse to further exertion.

The book did not fix her attention, and her thoughts wandered far afield, when she was roused by the announcement—

"Mr. Preston!"

"Oh! I *am* so glad to see you," she exclaimed, with genuine pleasure, starting up to shake hands with him. "I did not think you would come up so soon."

"It does not seem soon to me," said Preston, his somewhat pallid cheek flushing at the warmth of her welcome. "I came to town yesterday. Lady Mary desires her love, and says she will be quite ready to start for the Italian lakes on the twenty-sixth."

"That is good news. I never felt so anxious to leave London."

"What has London done?"

"Nothing whatever. It comes from myself, and what are you going to do with yourself, Mr. Preston?"

"I do not know," he returned, and a short silence fell upon them, which he broke by describing some of the men and incidents of the Damer Court shooting-party.

"Why do you not come to Florence, Mr. Preston?" asked Celia, suddenly. "I am very fond of Florence. It is such an inexhaustible place. You could write quite as well there as in London."

"I am not sure I shall write for some time to come."

"You can hardly be happy without a book on hand."

"I am not particularly happy, Mrs. Rivers; so I cannot settle to any work."

"I am very sorry to hear you say so. I trust no misfortune has happened to you!"

"No; but my life is somewhat spoiled at present by what I fear are vain longings for an unattainable good."

"May I ask what it is?" said Celia, growing suddenly grave.

"I long intensely," resumed Preston, "for the companionship, the constant companionship of the most companionable, the most sympathetic woman I have ever met; and I fear my vaulting ambition doth o'erleap itself. In short, I find where so much is at stake I am an utter coward."

He paused, and Celia looked at him, half-puzzled, half-surprised as his meaning dawned upon her.

"Is it possible you have not perceived that life without you is indeed dull and colourless? Do you think me presumptuous in venturing to think of you as my wife?"

"Any woman might be proud to bear your name," said Celia, in a low voice; "and to me you are a highly valued friend. To talk with you is a real pleasure; but I still shrink from the idea of marriage. Can you wonder at it?"

"I do not; yet my affection is rooted and grounded in friendship and esteem. These are rocks against which the winds and waves of errant fancy and faithlessness may beat in vain. It has come to me of late as our acquaintance has

deepened into intimacy to think that I might make you happy. We understand each other very thoroughly." He stopped abruptly. His earnest, pleading eyes, the nervous action of his hands as he played with his watch-chain touched her as evidence of weakness in so mentally strong a man.

"I feel you offer me a chance of happiness, Mr. Preston," she said, surprised at her own inclination to say "yes." "Believe me, I appreciate it. But I cannot make up my mind at once. Give me a few hours to think over your proposal."

"Yes, of course. I could scarcely expect an immediate reply, unless, indeed, it were a refusal," he added, with a smile. "I am well aware you are for every reason entitled to a much more brilliant alliance, and you might like to consult your friends, the Damers."

"No," she interrupted, quickly. "I shall only consult my own feelings, my own judgment, such as it is." She rose as she spoke, and Preston understood he was dismissed. "I will write to you to-morrow," said Celia, giving him her hand. He kissed it softly and went noiselessly away.

* * * * *

Preston left Celia matter for serious reflection. She sat long in absolute stillness, her hands lying idly in her lap, thinking hard. A week ago she could not have imagined entertaining the idea of marrying anyone, but now she felt tempted to accept Preston, chiefly because he was so much more a friend than a lover. He was certainly a delightful companion, and his work interested her deeply. Then his judgment was so calm, his quiet sense so reliable, she might well be proud of being the choice of such a man. How tranquilly, how harmoniously life would flow under his auspices if, if only she were not obliged to marry him. As a brother with whom she could live blamelessly no arrangement could have been more perfect, but the idea of marriage still revolted her.

“I wish I could love George Preston ; that would solve all difficulties.”

The power of loving, however, seemed to have left her. She regretted this, for her old romance about Rivers had nearly died away, and her brief married life was like a dim dream of early youth, yet the idea of another husband was abhorrent to her. She had no dislike whatever to men. No sense of the wrong done her by one had in the least embittered her towards the rest, but the knowledge that Derek, the lover of her dawning womanhood, on whom she had lavished the tenderness of her wifely love, whose passion for herself in the early days of their marriage had been so intoxicating, was still living, still able, like herself, to recall those passages known to themselves alone, made her flush with shame when the thought of giving him a successor flashed through her mind. She was quite aware, nevertheless, that if another man could touch her heart, could make her pulses throb with mingled pain and pleasure, these scruples would fade away and the past be blotted out. But for the present her objections were insurmountable. Later she might be more disposed to make new ties, but she had no right to keep Mr. Preston hanging on in uncertainty. With a curious mixture of haste and reluctance she wrote him a few lines of refusal most gently yet firmly worded, and felt relieved yet sad when she had despatched her note.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CELIA had slept ill. Though at first relieved by her decision against Preston, doubt had again seized her, and all through the night-watches she debated with herself whether she had done wisely or unwisely in refusing him.

“I am frightfully selfish,” was her final conclusion. “I really want to take all George Preston is willing to bestow

and give him nothing in return. I do not like to lose his companionship, and I cannot consent to make a home for him. How uncomfortable and depressing everything seems, and I must stay here all alone for a fortnight or longer before Lady Mary is ready to go abroad. Then, when I return? But it is folly to look so far ahead."

Somewhat weary and dazed for want of her usual sound sleep, she gladly took the cup of tea brought her by her maid and dressed herself slowly, as there was nothing particular to do in the day which was before her. Soon after she had finished the pretence of eating her breakfast Celia settled herself to reread a book of Preston's, the first of his she had ever perused, when her major domo Luigi announced that Mr. Ridley wished to see Mrs. Rivers.

"Mr. Ridley!" she exclaimed, a good deal surprised, as he rarely called upon her. "Show him in."

"This is very nice and good of you," she said, coming forward to greet him with a bright smile; "and to come so early, too."

Mr. Ridley, who seemed more portly than when she last saw him, was, as usual, well dressed in the freshest and glossiest of clothes, a gold double eyeglass depending from his neck, a thick gold chain looped from button-hole to pocket of his wide waistcoat; in short, the details were precisely the same as ever, but something in his face told her that the picture of solemn respectability before her was stirred to his innermost depths.

"My dear Mrs. Rivers, my dear young lady," were his first words, and there he stopped.

Celia drew a comfortable, solid chair forward.

"Sit down, my dear Mr. Ridley, and tell me what has happened. You are disturbed. I hope nothing to distress you seriously?"

"I have never been so distressed in my life before!" cried Ridley, with a catch in his breath.

"Your son?" cried Celia. "He is safe and well, I trust."

"We! Oh, there is nothing the matter with us. It is for you, my dear Mrs. Rivers, I am so greatly concerned."

"About me? But I am quite well. There is nothing the matter with me—at least," looking into his face searchingly, "nothing I know of."

"Exactly. You do *not* know. I only heard last evening on my return to town and waited to tell you till this morning that you might have a night's rest. My dear young lady, the bank has failed; everything is gone, and all that belongs to you will be swallowed up."

"This is amazing," said Celia, opening her big brown eyes, and scarcely taking in his meaning. "Do explain things a little."

Mr. Ridley, who expected hysterical screams at least, was relieved, and proceeded to recount all he knew—how the bank, chiefly through Roberts, the real head of the firm, had advanced large sums to a certain speculative company called the Gatesborough Building Association, and this company, having become embarrassed, involved the bank in their ruin. Much nefarious dealing was suspected, but nothing certainly known as yet.

Celia, who was perfectly composed, put various questions to her sympathetic ex-guardian, eliciting the uncomfortable fact that the depositors in the bank could, and no doubt would, claim every atom of property belonging to the members of the banking firm.

"Then this house must go, and the furniture and my jewels? I have a good many jewels. I am sure the unfortunate depositors are welcome to them. But shall I have *no* money at all? What am I to do?" This was by no means a despairing cry. It was spoken in a tone of quiet curiosity.

"We must see what is to be done, my dear Mrs. Rivers;

but there is no use in attempting to conceal from you that the position is deplorable. You will no doubt find kind friends to help you."

"I must help myself if I can. But I am too bewildered to think." She stopped, and, clasping her hands on her knee, gazed at him with a thoughtful look, which, to his immense surprise, gradually brightened into a smile—an amused smile. "What an extraordinary *bouleversement*! How very disagreeable it will be to think of every penny! I suppose I shall not starve." Then, with a sudden and complete change of expression and laying her hand on his arm, "My poor people, Mr. Ridley. What *am* I to do about my poor people!"

"Oh! they must do without your help. You are poor yourself. Of course, you have no official intimation of this crash as yet. I think you might draw a cheque for your servants' wages, and at least save them from loss."

"I drew rather a large cheque yesterday. Beyond wages and things of that kind I owe very little. I have not really been extravagant."

"No; I am sure of that. You have been most moderate, so far as I know, for, of course, I have not had much to do with your money matters since—since your unfortunate marriage."

Celia noticed that he had never before spoken in such terms or in such a tone of her unhappy history. Could it be that he ventured to speak so freely because of her having fallen from her high estate of wealth and independence? It was but a flash of thought, and she banished it at once with some scorn of herself for being capable of evolving it.

"I don't think I ever cared much for wealth, but it is rather appalling to have nothing. Tell me what shall I do now, to-day? Can I remain here?"

"You might till to-morrow, yes; but you can draw no more money."

"I had better pay the servants and tell them the truth at once, and then——"

She looked at him with a painfully puzzled look.

"I should be happy——" began Ridley, when the door was opened and the footman announced "Mrs. Maclean!"

Gertrude came in quickly and, going straight to Celia, embraced her with unusual *empressement*. "Tell me, dear," she exclaimed, "is it all true? Is it as bad as Alan says?"

"Nothing can well be worse, I imagine," said Celia, feeling suddenly strong and cheerful as her friend's arms closed round her. "I am bereft of everything. Of course, I am stunned for the moment, but I shall rally and consult with you and your good husband what I can do to maintain myself. Mr. Ridley (you know Mr. Ridley?) has had a cruel task in explaining things to me."

Mrs. Maclean held out her hand to him, exclaiming, "We must do what we can for her. I have come to take her home with me till something can be arranged."

"It is the best and kindest thing you can do," cried Ridley, with an air of relief. "I shall in the meantime make the best terms I can for you. I do not think the creditors will refuse you a certain amount of wearing apparel, and the sooner you remove it the better."

"Exactly. I shall not go back without you and whatever you may venture to take."

After some further talk as to what must be done, and promising to communicate with his client directly he had further news, Mr. Ridley was about to leave them, when a telegram was brought to Mrs. Rivers. It bore the address, "Damer Court," and contained the words "Greatly distressed; George will be with you this afternoon." A little sob swelled Celia's throat and a few tears welled over her long lashes as she handed it to Ridley, saying, with a bright smile, "The world is not a bad place, after all. I have no dread of the future, black as it looks."

"You are fortunate in having good friends, my dear Mrs. Rivers. I rejoice to find it so, and, now the first shock of this terrible business is over, it occurs to me that Captain Rivers has it in his power to secure you against penury. I remember how hard I fought against what I considered your imprudence in settling a considerable sum. He has enjoyed the income arising from that sum ever since. I should think he could be induced to give you a decent allowance."

"No, certainly not! You will never have my consent to ask him, never!" interrupted Celia, vehemently. "I shall find some way to live without becoming a beggar or a burden."

"I will not urge the matter to-day," returned Mr. Ridley, accepting a warning glance from Mrs. Maclean; "you have had enough to bear. Another time——"

"It will be equally useless," put in Celia, shaking hands warmly with her adviser, who immediately left the room.

When the door had closed upon him Celia pressed both her hands over her eyes and stood a moment in silence. Then, dropping them, she exclaimed:

"This *is* a transformation scene. How good you are to ask me to your house. I am *so* delighted I shall feel safe for a breathing space with you. It is strange, but I do *not* fear the future. I shall float, I feel I shall float. I would not even be cast down but for my poor people. What can I do for them?"

"We will discuss all that. Let us act at present. What money have you? Can you pay the servants?"

"Yes, thank goodness; there are notes and gold in that bureau. I will have them up and explain to them that I, too, must go and earn my bread. Then we will pack up and go to my tower of refuge, your pleasant house. I will only take a bare sufficiency of clothing. I feel that all I have ought to go to the creditors of the bank. Ah! I am glad my poor father has been spared this. Just think, Gertrude, of Franck's

despair at being obliged to leave my newest 'confections,' my prettiest dinner dresses, behind. Ring, dear, and let me get this dreadful task over."

It was an extraordinary experience to Celia, that flitting from her beautiful home empty-handed, with barely enough of necessary clothing—yesterday a wealthy woman, to-day penniless and denuded. Yet the only tears shed were by the profoundly afflicted Francks, and the pained air of trouble was worn by Mrs. Maclean.

It was considerably past luncheon time when they reached M—— Square, and Dr. Maclean, who had contrived to wait at home, went to the door to bestow a warm welcome on the homeless guest whom he expected.

"I am delighted to see you look brave and well," he exclaimed, shaking hands with her over again when they were in the dining-room. "You'll pull through all right; you don't seem to me like a woman who could be crushed."

"I have one source of comfort, my dear doctor,—the ruin falls on myself alone," returned Celia. "Moreover, I have not had time to feel it yet. Do not credit me with more courage than I possess. Am I *very* dishonest? I must confess to having stolen some dozen volumes—special favourites. I could not leave them behind, and cannot yet quite take in the idea that nothing of all I have bought for myself belongs to me."

"No wonder. It all seems iniquitous," cried Mrs. Maclean, indignantly.

"At all events, it is extremely disagreeable," said Celia.

"Come, sit down and try to eat some luncheon," urged the doctor, placing a chair for her and filling her glass with champagne. "You must keep up the body, and the soul will take care of itself."

"What a pagan maxim," she returned, taking the seat offered to her; "but I confess my vitality seems ebbing away. I suspect your wife needs support more than myself."

The friends sat on in earnest yet bewildered talk till Dr. Maclean was obliged to go out. Then his wife persuaded Celia to go to her room and lie down in the hope of obtaining a little sleep.

In spite of the steady front she presented, Celia had sustained a stunning blow, though she suffered more physically than mentally. She now began to feel the absolute necessity of relief from thought, and allowed herself to be made comfortable on a sofa and covered up. Soon her thoughts grew confused and dim, and sleep stole over her strained senses.

Down-stairs her hostess sent for an evening paper and sought eagerly for what scanty news she could find of the disastrous crash which had wrecked so many fortunes. It was a cruel stroke of fortune to sweep everything from a creature so tenderly nurtured as Celia. Later on, she would find the terrible inconveniences of absolute poverty. "She might live between us and the Damers," mused Mrs. Maclean, as she sat in a low chair by the fire, for it was a chill, damp day, though August was not yet ended. "She would be welcome to us both; but she will never consent to this. She will never live on others. What can she do?" and she lapsed in reverie, musing on the trials of Celia and her own happiness in having thrown in her lot with the man she had loved so well and lost for so long, her heart softening as she remembered the pleasant days she owed to the kindly, sympathetic companionship of her generous friend. From this she was roused by the announcement of "Mr. Damer!"

"I am so glad you have come," exclaimed Mrs. Maclean, starting up to shake hands with him.

"Mrs. Rivers had the telegram?" he returned. "What an awful business! She is here?"

"Yes. I have persuaded her to lie down; but I will tell her you have come."

"No, not yet. I am in no hurry. Is she in a terrible state of depression?"

"She is quite wonderful. Of course, she cannot yet realise what her state of destitution will be."

"It is an infernal shame that she should be victimised in this way, yet I suppose the underlying principle is right. Defaulting bankers ought to pay a heavy forfeit. But there never was a more blameless woman in money matters than Celia Rivers. We are very anxious to know what Derek will do. I have heard from Wells, our family solicitor, that when Derek deserted his wife he raised a thousand pounds, but has since paid off that sum, with every penny of interest, nor has he touched the income since the year after the break-up, so there is a good sum standing to his name. I am certain he will restore it to her. He wished to do so before, but there were difficulties, and she would not hear of it. I hesitate to write to him. I should prefer his opening the matter of his own free will, without any suggestion from anyone."

"Yes, and you must remember that if he were to *give* her the whole it would be immediately swallowed up by the creditors of the bank."

"Yes, yes, I understand ; but Mrs. Rivers has a very good adviser in that Mr. Ridley, who manages matters for her."

"Of course, for the present we can keep her with us ; but beyond a few weeks she will never consent to stay as a guest. Have you any fresh news about this unfortunate bank?"

"Very little. It is feared that Roberts, who was practically the head of the firm, is implicated in some very shady proceedings."

After some further conversation respecting the woeful and unexpected crash, Mrs. Maclean left the room, returning in a few minutes to say that Celia still slept.

"I think it a pity to rouse her," she added ; "could you not dine with us to-day, and we can all discuss matters together? Dr. Maclean will be so glad to see you, and so will Celia."

Damer readily accepted, and drove away to execute some commissions with which he had been charged. Celia's sleep

refreshed her, and she was amused to find her maid laying out as near an approach to a "toilette" as her mistress's present scanty means would allow, with tearful eyes and an occasional sob.

"Oh, Francks, you will make me quite smart in spite of deficiencies."

"Well, ma'am, I'll do my best ; and Mr. Damer is to dine here to-night."

"Indeed, I am very glad," and Celia proceeded to dress with a sense of clearer brain power than she had felt since Mr. Ridley's astounding communication.

She was in the drawing-room when Damer and the doctor arrived almost together. The former greeted her with warm cordiality, and, dinner being announced a few minutes after, nothing was said save on ordinary topics until the servant withdrew, when Mr. Damer exclaimed :

"Well, Mrs. Rivers, I am charged to bring you back to the Court at once. You will have a letter from Mary to-night or to-morrow to that effect, and I earnestly hope you will take up your abode with us till the storm be overpast."

"You are all far too good," said Celia, "and later I shall be only too glad to refresh myself by a visit to your delightful home, but at present I had better avail myself of *this* very comfortable asylum. I may want to see Mr. Ridley or he may want to see me. The sooner I see about finding something to do the better."

"There cannot be any need for such tremendous haste," exclaimed Damer.

Celia replied by taking out her "porte-monnaie," from which she extracted a five-pound note, a sovereign, and some silver.

"There," she said, "is my all ; and you must acknowledge that it is a slender capital to wait upon."

"Still, dear, you are not utterly without other resources," said Mrs. Maclean.

“The sooner I can find something that is not charity the better; but tell me how things are going and what people say.”

For a considerable time the quartette of friends discussed the painfully absorbing subject till Mrs. Maclean made a move up-stairs, where the gentlemen speedily followed them.

The doctor was somewhat old-fashioned in his tastes and loved a cup of tea after dinner. While his wife prepared this, Celia walked in an absent way to the piano and began to play a Scotch air very softly. Then she wandered to another, to some German volklieder, ending with several brilliant Hungarian dances.

“Eh! you *can* make the piano speak,” exclaimed Maclean, who was genuinely fond of music.

“You think so, really?” said Celia, returning to the tea-table. “Don’t you think that some enlightened parents or guardians might give me ‘a bit of siller’ for teaching their bairnies to make music?”

“Yes; of course they would,” said Damer.

“Oh! if you come to that, I do not doubt you would find pupils—paying pupils—but it will take time and a good many to enable you to keep a roof over your head, my dear Celia.”

“I wonder how much it would take to feed and clothe me and to pay rent;” whereupon the talk took a fresh turn, and the cost of existence on the simplest and least expensive lines became the absorbing topic. Celia became quite animated and interested, and many ideas which would have made an experienced housekeeper laugh were propounded.

CHAPTER XXV.

WHEN Celia retired to her room, she took with her two letters which had come by the evening post,—one from Mr. Ridley saying that he would call as soon as he had anything to communicate, the other she had not opened.

When she had dismissed the sorrowing Francks she sat some time in deep thought before breaking the seal. The world was not a bad place after all ; everyone so far was good to her. She had had a telegram from Riversdale, who was away in Inverness-shire, saying he would be in town the following day. The letter she held was, she saw, from Preston.

“How glad I am I refused them both,” mused Celia. “My matrimonial troubles were due to my money, but it would be worse to be a penniless burden on a man.” She slowly opened the letter and read as follows :

“I was more grieved and disappointed by your letter than I had any right to be, for you have never given me cause to hope. I write now to entreat. You will forget for the present that I ever aspired to be anything save a faithful friend—a possibly useful assistant in the painful crisis which has occurred. You shall never hear a syllable from me of the moment of self-deception when I mistook my own eager desire for something which encouraged me to hope. Let me help you in any way I can. I will not venture to call without your permission. Pray let me have it. Should the day ever come when you could look upon me as a not unacceptable life-companion, you would make me not only supremely happy, but infinitely proud. I do not ask you to think of this possibility at present ; only to remember that, whether as friend or lover, I am always yours devotedly,

“G. PRESTON.”

Celia sat looking at the page for some moments. Then the tears slowly welled over and dropped on the paper, rather to her surprise. Then she broke down and wept for some minutes, as she had not done since she had heard the news of her financial ruin.

The kindness shown her was overpowering, and affected her with a kind of pathetic pleasure. What a true gentleman Preston was! But to think of marrying him was more than ever impossible. She would never be a burden on anyone, man or woman, save for some brief interval, so long as she had health and strength. "And, thank God, I have very good health. If only I could get some help for two or three of my sickly pensioners I could face everything. I must try to find shelter for them in some of the various institutions for which they may be eligible. What shall I do when these few pounds are done? Ah! there is no use in thinking about it. I wish I could sleep, I am so dreadfully tired."

Her wish was fulfilled, and she awakened refreshed and of good courage.

* * * * *

The next few days went by in a state of inactivity. There was really nothing to be done but to wait the action of the spoilers, and Celia employed herself in visiting some of her pensioners and writing to others, explaining the terrible reverse of fortune which had befallen her. She also applied herself to collect votes for several whom she could no longer assist and whom she thought might gain admittance into sundry charitable homes. These occupations kept Celia busy, while at intervals she discussed the best way of making known her wish to obtain pupils for the piano.

"It is too 'out of season' time now to attempt it," said Mrs. Maclean. "The earliest date at which you can hope for a beginning is October. Then set to work in a business-like manner, print regular circulars, and send them round to everyone you know with a nice little note from yourself, and to all

you don't know without one. You'll see you will find employment. Of course, you will stay on with us till you have a *clientèle*. It is the greatest comfort to have you all the long days when Alan is away."

"And a horrid nuisance to have me during the short evenings when he *is* at home," added Celia, laughing. "I am half inclined to give you a respite and go to Lady Mary for a while, as she urges me."

"No, no. You may be needed in London, and for many reasons you are better here. Then Dr. Maclean has a scheme, but I must not say anything about it yet."

"It is cruel to rouse my curiosity and not satisfy it."

"Lord Riversdale has been here to-day."

"He has? Oh, Gertrude, how good he is. Fancy his coming up all the way from Inverness-shire just to talk things over. Very few people have been so kindly treated as I have been, and he undertakes to keep up the two pensions I was most anxious about until I get my poor friends admitted to the 'Home for Unprovided Gentry' or the 'Asylum for Superannuated Teachers.' This is indeed a load off my mind; and, do you know, I believe he has taken a fancy to Lord Glenalbin's youngest daughter, Jessie Carr. He talked a great deal of her. I remember meeting her at the Beatons more than a year ago. She is a nice, bright girl. I do hope he will be happy, whoever he may marry."

"Then he despairs of *you*?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that *you* refuse to be Lady Riversdale."

"How do you know?"

"I should have been very dense if I had not guessed; but after all you were right. I do not think Riversdale would have suited you. There is someone else who would be far more congenial."

"Under my present circumstances *no* one would be suitable," said Celia, very gravely, and neither spoke for a minute

or two. Then Lady Yoddrell was announced, and, with a glance at her friend expressive of resignation, Celia stood up to receive this social veteran, who had always punctiliously observed the rules of etiquette towards her relative's deserted wife; but she never succeeded in getting upon intimacy with young Mrs. Rivers. She was now growing rather deaf, but as keen as ever for gossip and society.

"Well, my dear Mrs. Rivers, and how are you keeping up under this frightful misfortune? I did not write to you because I knew I should have to come up and see the dentist, so I thought I would take the opportunity of calling. You are looking wonderfully well—quite wonderfully.—Isn't she?" to Mrs. Maclean, who was an old acquaintance.—"Why, I expected to find you drowned in tears and scarcely fit to be seen, and you have quite a nice colour."

"Thank you. I feel remarkably well. It is a great mistake to fret about the inevitable."

"Quite true—quite right; but very few women have your philosophy; and what are you going to do? Oh! you don't know yet? No, I suppose not. Tell me, did you save any of your jewels from the wreck?"

Celia shook her head.

"Not one?" in a little scream. "Well, well; it is *too* bad. Eh! what did you say?"

"I did not attempt to keep any of them."

"Nonsense; you had every right to keep them. I should have fought for them, if they had been mine, tooth and nail."

Celia laughed and shook her head.

"Do you know, I heard of your worthless husband the other day! He had been wounded, you know, in that affair up among the hills, and was ill—very seriously ill. Now he is going on some mad expedition to find a pass or a road or some such thing through the Himalayas to China; never heard of anything so mad. Suppose he is tired of his last wife and wants to get away from her."

"I never heard that Captain or Major Rivers married again!" ejaculated Mrs. Maclean.

"Oh, yes; of course he did. That wretched woman who left her husband to go to him. Scandalous, shameful! I forget who told me; some one quite fresh from India,—a very disreputable woman, I believe."

"Who, your informant?" put in Celia.

"Oh, dear no. That Mrs. What's her name, the woman Derek married,—very disreputable indeed,—had half a dozen lovers before she went off with him. Eh! what do you say? Would rather not talk any more about it? Oh, very well. I am the last person in the world to talk scandal, but I am almost sure my informant was a man,—yes, and I think he was at the wedding, and more shame for him." Silence.

"Well, and what do you think of doing?" resumed Lady Yoddrell, after looking from one to the other in vain for some leading observation. "I have had you very much in my mind. Suppose you come to me for the winter months. My place is rather dull and dreary in winter. You might be very useful. My eyes are not what they were, and you have a good, clear voice. You could read to me, and write my letters, and save food and rent and coals for four or five months. That would be a great help, hey?"

"Thank you," returned Celia, smiling; "but you see I have risen immensely in my own estimation since I lost my money, and I would not read or write for anyone unless I were tempted by a *large* salary."

"Very foolish, my dear; very foolish, isn't she, hey?" to Mrs. Maclean. "Wait a little, and when you see *how* hard it is to manage on nothing you may think better of my offer. If you do, let me know. I shan't leave England *this* year. Now, I really cannot stay another minute; there is no use asking me, but I shall be in town till Friday. Can you both come and take tea with me on Thursday? No? Why not? You can't have anything to do. Well, Mrs. Rivers, if you

change your mind, let me know. I have never seen your husband, my dear," to Mrs. Maclean. "I'll give you a dinner when I come up to town at Easter. Does he speak very broad Scotch? No? Oh, I'm glad to hear it. I can't bear a provincial accent."

"We call it a national accent," said Gertrude, smiling.

"Oh, I suppose you think him faultless now. Just wait a bit. Very glad to see you looking so well, Mrs. Rivers; very glad, indeed," and she bid them adieu.

"Her frank selfishness is amusing, but her coarse indifference to the feelings of others is——"

"Painful," said Celia, filling up the pause. "Yes. She hurt me, I confess. I have almost buried the past, but I am still wounded to think that Derek has sunk beneath what he was."

"I would give much to know the truth about him," said Mrs. Maclean, as if to herself.

The next evening, as they sat together after dinner, the doctor suddenly exclaimed, "I shall now unfold my scheme to you, Mrs. Rivers, for I am quite sure Gertrude has given you a hint that I have been scheming."

Celia smiled. "Pray unfold your scheme, Dr. Maclean," she said.

"I have been attending the second daughter of Milton, the great ship-owner. I knew him in Australia. She is a fanciful young thing, not strong, and slightly hysterical. I want her to leave London at once and travel awhile in Switzerland or anywhere. Now, it does not suit the father or mother to go from home just now, so I promised to find some suitable and *very* superior person to travel with the little invalid until her parents can join her, when they intend to take her to Rome for the winter. This would just fill up the gap between this and the end of September. How say you? May I recommend *you*?"

"Let me think," exclaimed Celia, pressing her hand

against her eyes ; " this girl is not crazy ? I have a horror of insane people."

" Not she. She is as sane as you are, though not specially gifted with common sense. Remember, though I mention this as a good opportunity, it is my earnest wish that you remain with us as long as it suits you."

" Your invitation is most tempting," said Celia, " but I think I prefer beginning to earn my living as soon as possible. I hope these people will give me some money as well as food and lodging, then I can save something to start on as a music teacher."

" I'll take care of that," said the doctor, emphatically.

After discussing the project thoroughly and disposing of all Mrs. Maclean's objections, Celia gave the doctor permission to open negotiations. The Damers both came up to town as soon as they heard of the plan, which they strenuously opposed, but Celia was firm.

" I cannot live on charity," she said, " and the sooner I begin to work the better. I am really very lucky to find this chance. It would never do to lose it."

Finding she was firm, her friends gave way and did their utmost to facilitate her preparations. On their side, Mr. and Mrs. Milton were delighted to find such a companion for their daughter. Besides, Mrs. Derek Rivers had been so much in everyone's mouth for the usual nine days that it was rather a bit of distinction to secure her services. Celia was not fascinated by the young lady who was to be her charge. She was a pallid, dull-looking girl, not yet seventeen, with a rather sulky expression. Her features were delicate and regular, and, were she roused to life and interest, she might have been pretty.

Lady Mary relieved Celia's mind on one point, and that an important one. Her own maid, after a long and faithful service, was going to be married, and so her ladyship took Francks to replace her.

But, though she never faltered in her determination to seize the first chance of independence which offered, none could guess how low Celia's heart sank within her as the moment of departure approached. It was, indeed, a plunge into a new and rather appalling world.

Mrs. Milton had been kind and friendly about all their arrangements, but her tone was patronising and not too well bred; and the idea of separation from all she knew and loved made her almost regret having rejected Preston's offer. Above all, she dreaded being alone with that silent, sulky child, and neither Francks nor her ever-observant right-hand man Luigi there to take care of her.

Lady Mary and Mrs. Maclean took her to the station the morning of her departure, bidding her an affectionate farewell, and reiterated injunctions not to stay an hour longer in her new engagement than she felt comfortable and content.

"Poor, dear thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Maclean, breaking the silence with which they had watched the train vanishing. "She is very brave, but there was a sad, wistful look in her eyes as she said good-bye."

"I do wish she would have stayed on with us for the winter," returned Lady Mary.

"That would have been impossible to Celia. It would have made her more unhappy than anything else. Believe me, she has chosen wisely, and I feel she will win through."

"How could Derek have thrown away such a woman! I am certain he has bitterly regretted his conduct by this time."

"It is hard to say what his ideas respecting his own conduct are," said Mrs. Maclean. "You will return with me, dear Lady Mary?"

"Thank you very much; no. I leave by the three-thirty train, and have some shopping to do in the meantime."

Thus Celia was launched into the third phase of her chequered existence, leaving all that was most essential to the brightness and happiness of her life behind.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CELIA soon found the position she had undertaken was no sinecure.

Aline Milton was really the victim of selfishness, intensified by hysteria. Fancying herself neglected and ill-treated by her family because she was a fright as compared with her sister—a plump, healthy, good-humoured girl, free from fancies and innocent of imagination—Aline had gradually grown to despair of herself, and so lost interest in everything.

The hints obtained from Dr. Maclean proved of great value, and Celia adopted a firm but good-humoured tone, insisting on early rising and an open-air life, and endeavouring to find out some object which could rouse her charge to some sense of pleasure. At last she found that Aline had a faint fancy for drawing, which, with the help a little artist girl whom they met at Schwanbad, in the Black Forest, and who delighted to find a pupil, Celia eagerly cultivated. She proposed to write a diary describing their life at the rustic bathing-place, which Aline was to illustrate, and to her joy this bait took. Nevertheless, she began to long very much for London and the society of her friends and equals, for with Aline she gave everything and received nothing as regarded intellectual intercourse. It was early in September when Mrs. Maclean received the following :

“I have been a very bad correspondent, dear Gertrude, and I daresay you imagine I have more time than I know what to do with. But this is not the case. Aline and I are always busy—rather breathlessly busy, indeed. Now that she begins to interest herself in things, she is almost too eager to be ‘up and doing.’ She is full of illustrating my book. (Can you imagine a book of mine !) Then she has started a

piece of fancy work, which we designed between us, and is making a collection of plants and ferns peculiar to this district. Of course, I must share in all this. The effect on her looks and temper is amazing. The cloud has nearly left her brow. Constant exercise in this delightful air gives her a slight healthy colour, and her eyes have no longer their lacklustre, sombre look. I hope Mrs. Milton will be pleased when she sees her again. Indeed, I am sure she will, poor woman. What grief and anxiety she has had about this girl. I wonder how far she was responsible? They kept her too long at home, and petted her too much. She is by no means bad at heart, but terribly jealous by nature.

“I do not think we shall be here much longer. Mrs. Milton writes that they start for Rome in about ten days, and wishes us to meet them at Turin, where they will stay a week to see some relative who has married an Italian there. Mrs. Milton is very anxious that I should accompany them to Rome. I feel rather doubtful about it. I long to see you and the Damers, for the last six or seven weeks have not been exactly joyous, and against this I must balance the economy and modest accumulation the position offers. We'll see when I talk to Mrs. Milton and the eldest daughter. I do hope they will flatter poor Aline about her looks. It would do her more good than anything else, and we must help these weak sisters. Shall I go to Rome, dear? I have never had the courage to visit the Eternal City since I used to drag poor Derek from gallery to museum, from museum to church. If I go there now, what a change, what a transformation! But *the* change is now so old a story I do not think it will hurt me much to see the place again. As to the loss of my money, I am amazingly indifferent. I suppose, when I find it difficult to pay my rent or to provide my dinner, I shall begin to rail against fortune. I am delighted to hear that the flood-tide of patients has set in for your 'gude man.' My love to him. Shall you be in town at Christmas? I should so much like to

eat my Christmas-dinner with you, but I may devour it in Rome. I am undecided on this point. Do you know that since this second catastrophe in my life I feel awfully old ; not unhappy or grumbly, but disposed to be still, quite still and resigned. I do hope that no further shocks await me. Perhaps, if my music scheme fails, the doctor (after my success with Aline) will recommend me as a high-class nurse for nervous patients. I might do worse.

“ Ever yours, affectionately,

“ CELIA RIVERS.”

“ There is a letter I had from Celia this afternoon,” said Mrs. Maclean, handing it to her husband as they sat together after dinner. “ It may be only my fancy, but I think there is the echo of a heartache in it.”

The doctor read it through in silence and then returned it to his wife.

“ Something like it,” he said. “ Give her my love when you write and advise her to go to Rome. It will do her good ; moreover, we shall gain time. If Lady Mary is right in her estimate of Rivers, he will contrive some plan by which to restore his wife the income she bestowed on him ; she can then at least enjoy a modest competence, and she will be happy enough.”

“ Yes, I will strongly advise her to accept Mrs. Milton’s offer. It might save her from fruitless efforts to start in any line here. She does not know what a task it is.”

This intention was duly fulfilled next day, and in due time Mrs. Maclean received a reply.

“ Your advice always has weight with me, but I am not yet decided. We start for Turin to-morrow, a few days sooner than I expected. If I accept Mrs. Milton’s proposal, you may not hear from me till I arrive in Rome ; if not, I may announce myself. In haste, but always yours,

“ CELIA RIVERS.”

Four days later Celia and her charge awaited the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Milton with their eldest daughter at the Hotel de —, in Turin. It was evening, and dinner awaited the travellers when they arrived.

“Aline! Why, my dearest child, how well you look?” was Mrs. Milton’s first exclamation as her eyes fell on the smiling, healthily-embrowned face of her daughter. “You seem like a new creature;” and even Aline could not doubt the genuine joy with which her mother and sister embraced her.

Then came the father, who had stayed behind to do a father’s usual paymaster’s work, and uttered even more decided exclamations of admiration at his daughter’s improved appearance. Tears came to Aline’s eyes as it flashed upon her how unjust her judgment on her “kith and kin” had been. A very bright and almost noisy dinner ensued, which made the travellers forget their fatigue till Mr. Milton ordered them all to bed. The next morning Mrs. Milton requested a *tête-à-tête* interview with Mrs. Rivers while the two girls went out with their father.

“You have done wonders, my dear Mrs. Rivers, absolute wonders!” cried the grateful mother.

“Circumstances were in our favour,” returned Celia. “Aline required a complete change in all her surroundings——”

“And you will come on to Rome with us, Mrs. Rivers? I dread taking Aline away from you.”

She hardly heard what her interlocutor said, so full was she of her own plans. Celia was undecided up to that moment, then a sudden conviction flashed upon her that Aline would do better if left alone with her own people without any extraneous backing up. Besides, she felt a sudden longing to be with Mrs. Maclean and Lady Mary, born, probably, of being an alien in this family reunion, where, in spite of the kindly courtesy with which she was treated, she felt herself an outsider.

"No, my dear Mrs. Milton, I am sure Aline had better be restored to you completely and separated from me. She will then feel she is quite one of you, and forget she had ever put any barrier between herself and the others ; besides, I want to be in London to carry out some plans of my own."

"If your remaining with us would hinder or interfere with any of your plans, I would not think of pressing you," cried Mrs. Milton, and she went on to express her warm gratitude and desire for Celia's company, but the latter was firm.

As Mr. Milton was anxious to reach Rome and secure apartments for the winter, Celia determined to start for England by the train from Brindisi which stopped at Turin, and, after an affectionate leave-taking, set forth accordingly. Never since she had recovered from the severe shock inflicted on her by her husband had Celia felt so depressed as when the train steamed slowly out of the station. The contrast between the happy family reunion she had just witnessed and her own isolation, the fact of travelling quite alone for the first time, the sudden conviction that a life of loneliness stretched itself before her, sent down her spirits below freezing-point. Meantime, she sped away into the night and finally fell into an uneasy sleep, broken by nightmare dreams, the result of fatigue and uneasy thoughts. Still, she got through the night, and, with the first daylight, was awake enough to note the many signs by which she perceived that Italy lay behind her and that she was on French soil. Sleep was again creeping over her when the train paused in the large station of L——, and the weary travellers gladly descended to stretch their limbs and partake of coffee and *petits-pains*, in the strength of which they hoped to hold out till they reached the next halting place, where *déjeuner* awaited them.

Celia followed the general example and entered the refreshment-room among the last, seating herself near the door, where she was soon served, for, besides speaking French well, there was something distinguished and attractive in her air

and bearing, though very plainly dressed in a travelling-suit of dark tweed and a black velvet toque, round the edge of which her fair hair curled. Some of the men looked at her with interest, and of these there were several sallow and soldierly-looking, evidently Anglo-Indians returning on furlough.

Having finished her cup of coffee, she went out on the platform, from which the train had been removed for the quarter of an hour or twenty minutes of stoppage, and, pausing at the book-stall, which was just being opened at that early hour, chose one or two volumes, which she placed in her travelling-bag. She then walked slowly along the platform, her attention being attracted by a boy of six or seven, who was playing with a cat. She spoke to the child, but he did not reply. Probably the noise of an approaching engine drowned her voice.

Suddenly the cat escaped from the boy's clutches and scampered away, followed by the child. Just as the animal reached the spot where Celia stood, it turned to cross the line, while she, terrified lest the boy who was in eager pursuit should be crushed by the approaching engine, flew to intercept him, when her foot caught against one of the curb-stones which was displaced, and she pitched forward across the rails, her travelling-bag beneath, and her right arm doubled under her.

The boy, startled, stood still and forgot his cat, the noise of the engine grew appallingly louder, and a man who was standing at the end of the platform rushed to Celia's help and managed to lift her out of danger not an instant too soon before a heavy goods train swept over the spot where she had lain.

"You have saved my life!" she exclaimed, faintly. Then, with a scream of pain, as he shifted her position, added, "Oh! do not touch my arm," and seemed to become insensible. She was vaguely conscious, however, that people crowded round, that every one talked at once, but the awful

shock of finding herself helpless and prostrate before the dreadful monster advancing to annihilate her, was too overpowering, and she fainted quite away.

When she came to herself she was puzzled to find she was in bed in a large, luxuriously-furnished bedroom. A nurse in the habit of a Sister of Mercy was bending over her; another woman, dark-eyed, well-dressed, and plump, stood at the other side of the bed, and a man, evidently the doctor, was busy bandaging her arm. On her attempting to speak he sternly enjoined silence, and the nurse, turning to a table on which stood phials, glasses, and various appliances, brought her a composing draught.

“To-morrow, *mon enfant*,” said the doctor, kindly, “to-morrow, you shall ask and know everything; now try to sleep.”

The first day and night Celia was feverish, disturbed by pain and bad dreams. The third day she was decidedly better.

It was very unfortunate that her right arm was disabled. How was she to let Gertrude or Lady Mary know her plight, and what an awful bill she must be running up! Fortunately, Mrs. Maclean would imagine she had gone on to Rome, and so for a week or two be saved anxiety. But the hotel expenses. These must be curtailed.

As she thought thus she watched Sister Monica knitting tranquilly, a stream of sunlight falling on her snowy linen cap and the religious medallion which hung round her neck.

It soothed Celia to watch her.

Here her reflections were interrupted by the appearance of her *déjeuner*, and with it a small bottle, its neck wrapped in a silver envelope.

“Why have they sent me champagne, to-day?” asked Celia.

“The doctor said madame might have it to-day, as the fever has left her.”

"I do not want it; indeed, I do not. I am feeling much stronger."

"But you have been greatly weakened, madame, and we wish to get you out of bed; then you will gather strength more quickly."

"It is not at all necessary to give me wine, sister," persisted the patient.

"I must do what the doctor desires," returned the nurse, calmly opening the bottle and pouring out a glassful.

Celia found herself obliged to obey. Once the bottle was opened she might as well drink some, and she found the effect very reviving. It stimulated her appetite, too, and when she had eaten she felt less uneasy and more hopeful.

"Pray, ask madame la propriétaire to come and see me," she said, as Sister Louise packed up her tray and prepared to carry it off.

"Certainly. Madame intends to take my place while I breakfast."

"What is her name?" asked Celia, sleepily.

"Madame Dulac," returned the sister, as she arranged the pillows and closed the window which had been open during the forenoon. "You have all you want, madame? Then sleep while you await Madame Dulac."

She closed the door softly, and a delicious drowsiness stole over her patient.

How long she slept Celia did not know, but when she opened her eyes they fell on the brown, black-eyed, smiling face of the landlady, who was contemplating her with sympathetic satisfaction.

"Madame is better to-day?"

"Yes; much better, thank you." Then followed an earnest inquiry as to *déjeuner*, and if it was appetising. A pause ensued, after which Celia, turning cautiously on her pillows, said:

"I wanted to speak to you, Madame Dulac, because I fear

you are lavishing luxuries on me which I shall not be able to pay for. This charming room is much larger than I need, nor do I want champagne, nor many other things. As I am so much better, I may probably be moved into another and a smaller room to-morrow, while——”

“Ah madame,” cried the lady of the hotel, “I dare not make any change. We—my husband and I—are under the orders of monsieur.”

“Monsieur?” repeated Celia, eagerly. “What——”

“The gentleman who saved your life, madame?”

“Is he here still?”

“He is. He remains until you are nearly well, and has ordered that everything of the best should be served to madame.”

“What is his name?” exclaimed Celia, rather white.

“Tiens. Your English names are somewhat difficult. It is Grandlit.”

“Grantley, I suppose,” repeated Celia, thinking where she had heard the name before.

Yes, the Rivers had relatives so called, and this man no doubt recognised her appellation. It was on her hand-bag. How ungrateful she had been. Not that she had forgotten her debt to the unknown, but she fancied that, after saving her, he had gone on his way. What extraordinary kindness and consideration. Perhaps he was staying on his own account.

“I do not think I know the gentleman. I must see him as soon as I can and have some explanation. Meantime, I beg you not to lavish costly luxuries upon me. I neither like to pay for them myself nor to ask others to pay.”

“Rest tranquil, madame. This gentleman is wealthy and noble, and no doubt understands the requirements of madame.”

“What is he like?” resumed Celia.

“Oh, very distingué; quite *comme il faut*; tall, not young.

Oh, no, a little grey, with an air of romance. He does not speak much French. He walks about all day, dines alone, and speaks very little. Nothing more English can be found."

This description suggested no ideas to Celia, and she dropped the subject. The day but one after the doctor advised that she should leave her bedroom for a small salon at the opposite side of the corridor.

"It has a charming outlook," he said. "You can see the river and upper part of the town. Then you get the afternoon and evening sun, whereas after midday this chamber is dull and sombre."

"But, really, I do not need two rooms, doctor. I have already incurred heavy expenses."

"That is nothing. Madame must have what is necessary. She need not trouble herself about these details."

"Oh, but I must. This gentleman is a stranger. I have no right to accept his bounty, and I will not."

"Dear madame, your business is to get well; then these small matters will arrange themselves."

"I should certainly enjoy going into another room," she murmured, half to herself.

"To-morrow, then, after your *déjeuner*," said the doctor, and left her.

"I can see this Mr. Grantley when I am in another room," thought Celia. "He will write to Gertrude for me. How shall I ever pay for all these good things and two rooms? Oh, it is awful to be without money!"

The next morning was warm and bright. Celia was so early awake and so eager to be up and dressed that Sister Monica yielded to her wish to take her *déjeuner* in the salon. She therefore established herself there an hour sooner than had been intended. The sister was quite excited at this stride forward, and, having settled her in a large arm-chair in one of the windows with her book and watch on a tiny table and pointed out the abundant flowers which gave perfume and

beauty to the apartment, went away to hasten the coming of breakfast. A few minutes after the door opened abruptly and a gentleman came in with a careless step, as if he thought the room was unoccupied—a tall, gaunt man, whose clothes hung loosely upon him ; his grave face deeply embrowned, his dark hair touched with grey. At first he did not see the slight figure draped in pale lilac cashmere, the right sleeve and shoulder seam cut open and tied together with ribbons of the same colour ; it was hidden by the back and sides of the chair. The intruder looked impatiently round as if he expected to find some one there. Then Celia rose and faced him, her small face very pale and seeming all brown eyes, her bright auburn-brown hair loosened by leaning against the side of her fauteuil. The moment their eyes met she cried, in a sort of despairing cry :

“ Derek ! Ah ! Derek ! ” turning a death-like white and catching the arm of the chair as if to support herself.

“ My God ! Celia, forgive me ! ” He sprang forward and caught her in his arms. “ I wanted to speak to nurse. I never meant to intrude on you. I did not dream you would leave your room so soon. ” He replaced her in her chair and stood back gazing at her with stern, melancholy eyes. “ I will call nurse. I can never forgive myself. This shock will throw you back. ”

“ Stay ! ” she returned, with breathless breaks, as if her heart beat hard. “ I am, you see, weak. I shall be myself in a moment, and I do not want nurse to see. ”

“ I understand, ” he said, and stood a moment in silence.

When Celia whispered “ Now, but do not send nurse ; she must not know, ” then he left the room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THIS most unexpected encounter set Derek Rivers's, or, as we must call him now, Grantley's heart and nerves thrilling with an amount of emotion very unusual in him.

Having watched down-stairs for the nurse, in order to ask if he might write to Mrs. Rivers, he ascended to the salon, where he thought he might find her, feeling sure that the invalid would not leave her own room till after mid-day, as the doctor had informed him.

He was greatly shocked at having come upon her un-awares, fearing he might have done her harm. If he had not, it might facilitate his attempt to procure an interview, which he was most anxious to obtain.

He therefore sat down and wrote his request, intending to see the nurse later and ask her if Mrs. Rivers might be permitted to read it. Having finished it, he sat long in thought. Assure himself as he would that his young wife was money-worshipping and bourgeoisie, conscience told him he had acted badly, selfishly. Now it was too late to repent—at least, to reap any fruits of repentance.

“Not that I shall be much affected by her implacability or her forgiveness. We are better apart. She would always have rubbed me up the wrong way; and who could have guessed that a soft, kitten-like, impulsive creature of her sort would have had so much back-bone. I am not a bit hard myself. If she had only said, ‘Come back to me, darling, and I will never contradict you again,’ I should have come fast enough. But I hate strong-minded, reasonable women, even when they are pretty, and she *is* pretty—not a beauty, but interesting. She looks a good bit older, though young

enough to be charming to many men, especially to those who do not know her as I do."

Here Sister Monica appeared, having been told that Monsieur le Colonel wished to speak to her, and he managed to explain that, if not imprudent, he wished the note he handed to her delivered to Mrs. Rivers and an answer returned. He understood the nurse to say "that if her patient was well enough she would do his bidding, but so far the experiment of moving into another room had been quite too much for her. She was very low and nervous." No answer reached Derek that evening. But next morning his friend the landlord brought a verbal message to the effect that "madame" would be happy to receive "monsieur" at two o'clock.

In fact, these English guests had excited an immense amount of interest and conjecture, though the latter was very wide of the facts.

Of course, a love-affair was supposed to be at the bottom of the mystery, yet Madame Dulac maintained that the lady did not know who her rescuer was; that no one, not even the great Sarah herself, could have acted ignorance as that transparent-looking English woman did.

Derek Grantley grew desperately restless and impatient as the hour of the interview approached. He supposed it was curiosity that made him so eager to look into those soft, sad eyes again. "They were always attractive," he said to himself, "but they have an intense expression now which used not to be there. Was it possible this self-controlled woman who kept her distant composure, though her nerves must have been quivering, was the creature he used to hold in a close embrace while he kissed her brow, her eyes, her lips?" But time was up, and he was under fire. "Le Colonel Grandlit!" announced the waiter.

"I have to thank you for consenting to see me," he said, after an instant of hesitation, and bowing in the stately fashion she knew so well.

"And I have to thank you for my life," she said, striving to control the tremor which vibrated through her frame at the sound of his voice.

"Oh, the engine was not so near as you fancied," he returned, with a slight wave of the hand, as if to put aside her thanks. "Do not stand," he added, quickly; "you must still be weak."

Celia gladly complied. He drew a chair opposite her.

"I will not intrude on you longer than I can avoid," he began, and stopped abruptly. Another pause, during which their eyes met and held each other.

"Have you been ill?" asked Celia, softly.

"Yes. In fact, I have been out of sorts for over a year, partly the result of being rather badly hit in that mountain affair. I was coming home anyway, and at Bombay I found letters informing me that poor old Grantley was dead, and had left all he possessed to me on condition of my taking his name in addition to my own. You will excuse my troubling you with so much of my own affairs, but I do not wish you to suppose I have adopted an 'alias.' Besides, I——" He hesitated a moment, and went on, "I thought it might annoy you less to think you owed a stranger what little service I have been able to give than to *me*."

"The past is past," said Celia, quietly. "I am truly grateful to you for the present."

"I am still deeply in your debt," he returned, in a very low tone. "The reason I have intruded on you is that, having heard with deep regret of the severe losses you have sustained, I am most anxious to place at your disposal the money *you* generously settled on *me*. The income has been accumulating for the last four or five years, and will at least give you a certain degree of independence. Pray, hear me out. I should never have used it under any circumstances, and I am now in possession of property far beyond my needs. It would therefore be doing me a great favour if you would use your

own money, and also be acting like a woman of sense, which you are, I think."

Celia did not speak at once; then she looked down and said, "I understand the feeling which prompts you to make this proposition, but I beg you, Colonel Grantley, to consider the claims which *others* may have on you."

A dark flush rose in his cheek. "I do not understand you. No one exists who has any claim on me."

Celia looked at him. He met her eyes steadily. She coloured and grew pale again at the implied assurance that he was free.

"I am rather reluctant to reconsider my former decision, Colonel Grantley. The knowledge that your fortunes are flourishing is a certain inducement to rescind it, but——"

"Remember, that if you will not use your own money, which happens to be in my hands, it will simply lie idle," he interrupted. "I will not touch it, and you want it; only it must be carefully dealt with, or the creditors of the bank will get hold of it; *that* must be guarded against."

He was quite natural and at ease now when speaking of business, and how vividly his well-remembered voice brought back those by-gone days of sweetest pleasure, of keenest pain. Celia hesitated. How strange it was to be speaking to him face to face. Was it sweet, was it bitter to be alone with him again?

"I must ask time till to-morrow before I can give you a decided answer," she said, at length.

"Very well; and as you cannot write, may I come again to hear it? I do not think you will refuse. As soon as I know certainly that you will take back your gift, I will write to my lawyer. I do not like to leave until I am sure you are safe from any relapse."

"You are very good. I am anxious to get back to London."

"Naturally. But you cannot travel alone. Will the doc-

tor let you go out for a drive? The air would set you up, and I can get you an open carriage. The environs are very pretty."

"Thank you—thank you very much. But, Colonel Grantley, pray do not order all kinds of luxuries for me. I cannot pay for them, and *no one* else shall."

"You can pay for them quite well out of your own money," he returned, smiling—a caressing smile; "and I promise you that you shall. I suppose I dare not offer to write for you to any one?"

"No; thanks. I shall ask Madame Dulac."

"Then if you get leave to drive you will let me know."

"I will; but Der—I mean Colonel Grantley—you need not delay your journey any more on my account. I think I am on the high road to recovery. Then the people here are very kind and attentive."

"Nevertheless, I will remain a few days. I need not assure you that you are safe from any intrusion on my part. After I ascertain your decision to-morrow, I will vex you no more by my presence, which, I am well aware, must be unwelcome." He rose as he spoke.

"Meeting is necessarily a trial, but, believe me, I am grateful, truly grateful for the service you have done me, and you have my good wishes for the future which lies before you."

He bowed low and took a few steps towards the door, then paused, turned, and said, in a low tone, "I do not ask your forgiveness; I do not deserve it. I only hope you will not hesitate to employ me if I can be of any use."

The next moment she was alone. Derek descended to his own room in a curious state of mental disturbance. Celia was the same, and yet so altered. There was something pathetic in her face, once bright with childlike gaiety. Even her smile was thoughtful. Her voice, always agreeable in tone, was softer and at present weaker. The buoyant eagerness of early girlhood was replaced by an indescribable, gentle com-

posure, which expressed the ease of self-reliance ; in short, the crudities of youth were replaced by the grace of fully developed, cultivated womanhood.

“ By Jove ! ” said Derek to himself as he seized his hat to start on a long ramble, for he was far too restless to sit still ; “ by Jove ! she has turned out a charming woman, and knows she is mistress of the position into the bargain. I am amazed some fellow hasn’t persuaded her to marry him. I wonder why she resisted. I suppose *I* gave her a turn against matrimony. I believe she was fond of me, though I doubted it at the time, yet if she had been she would not have shown such self-assertion. Even now her softness is not weak. ‘ The past is past ; ’ she said it with great composure. I don’t think she is even angry with me now. I have simply faded out of her mind as a bad dream, and that is as it should be. I deserve no more. She does not care enough now to be bitter against me. Most women would have contrived to have stung me even though I had saved her life. I never felt so small before. Well, it’s an odd chance, this encounter. I am glad I had the luck to do her a good turn. Now I suppose we shall drift apart. I’ve been rather an unlucky devil, and, now I have money and lands and all I can desire, it doesn’t seem a bit of good to me. She has certainly been the means of spoiling my life, though I suppose my own temper had something to do with it. I have a deuced bad temper, and it is not improved. Ah ! Celia was a sweet little creature at times, awfully sweet, but there is no use in thinking of that now,” and Derek quickened his pace in a sort of mechanical effort to get rid of a certain dull aching in that mysterious region of body or soul called, for want of a better term, “ heart.”

Next morning the doctor found his patient weak and feverish.

“ What has happened ? ” he asked. “ The day before yesterday you were fast gaining ground ; to-day you have lost it.”

"I had a very sleepless night, which may account for the falling off. I begin to worry about getting home."

"Then you will only delay your return."

"May I go out for a drive?"

"It might do you good. But not to-day; you are not strong enough."

"Was I not in danger of being crushed by the train when I fell across the line, doctor?"

"Imminent danger, I am told. I was not present, you know. I understand that Monsieur le Colonel risked his life to save yours."

"Ah!" murmured Celia, and paused.

"Monsieur le Colonel is related to madame?" resumed the doctor.

"He is a very near relation of my late husband, but I have not seen him for years," said Celia, with an amused smile.

"He is deeply interested in madame. His anxiety during your feverish condition was touching."

Celia sighed.

"He returns to England in a day or two, and will let my friends know where I am, for, of course, I cannot write."

Here a message was brought from Colonel Grantley to ask if Mrs. Rivers would receive him. The doctor therefore took leave. There was a short delay as he stopped to speak with the visitor for a minute or two.

Celia waited with a degree of impatience which surprised and annoyed her, and when Derek entered she was flushed and tremulous, and the next moment pale and shivering.

This time there was no sign of nervousness or hesitation about Celia's ex-husband.

"The doctor does not give a good account of you, to-day," he said. "You must try to get into the open air. I told him so."

"I did not know he spoke English."

"He does not, but he understands it a little—about as

much as I understand French. I'll see about a carriage for you ; perhaps you may go to-morrow."

"Thank you, very much," she sighed, and leant back in her chair as if weary.

"I must not trespass upon you longer than I can help," resumed Derek, hastily. "I have come for the answer you promised yesterday." His eyes sought hers with a pained, wistful expression, as if he longed to say more, but held himself well in hand.

"I have reflected, and have decided that it would be foolish and affected to refuse your friendly offer, especially as you have done without the money for so long, and are now a rich man. I leave it all to you to make whatever arrangements are best. I am sure Mr. Damer will help you."

"You forget. I do not suppose Damer will speak to me?"

"Oh, yes, he will. I have managed a few words to Lady Mary with my left hand. Here they are. I could not address an envelope. Will you put her name on it? Send it in a note from yourself, and you will all be friends again. Then—forgive me for seeming to dictate to you—go back to England as soon as you can. As yet my good friends in London think I am in Rome, and my friends in Rome believe I am in London ; at any moment they may find I am 'nowhere,' and be anxious and alarmed. You must see Lady Mary or Mrs. Maclean, and tell them where I am and how I came here, and that but for you I should never see their faces again."

"I can understand that it is painful to you to have me near you," said Derek, passing his hand over his brow.

"No, no, not that ; but, Colonel Grantley, can you not see that—that now I am better and able to act for myself—it is strange—nay, unheard of—that you and I should meet like ordinary acquaintances ? I might receive the greatest stranger in the world with more impunity than you. I am deeply, warmly grateful to you ; but—but don't you see it is the

height of all impropriety that you and I should meet, and in this remote peopled solitude?"

A deep flush passed over her face, and she laughed nervously, yet with a keen sense of humour at their anomalous position.

"If I can be of no further use," began Rivers, in a mortified tone, "I will start to-night."

"Use? Yes; of course you can be of use as soon as you get to London. See Mrs. Maclean. She will find a nice travelling maid who will come over here and escort me back; and oh! I long to be in dear, smoky, foggy London again."

"I will obey you. I will take the mail-train to-night. Trust me to deliver your note to Mary. I accept my dismissal. I think the people here will take care of you. It is good-bye, I suppose. Will you shake hands and bid me God-speed?"

"I can only give you my left hand, but I bid you heartily God-speed," she said. "I trust that life has many bright pages yet for you."

He took her hand and made a motion as if to raise it to his lips, then released it, and stood a moment irresolute.

"Must we never meet again?" he said, in a hoarse whisper.

"Better not—far better not," she returned, gently but firmly.

Derek looked into her earnest eyes for an instant; then turned and quickly left the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CELIA RIVERS was not prepared for the appalling sense of loneliness which fell upon her the following morning when the doctor paid his diurnal visit immediately before his patient's *déjeuner*, and opened his conversation with the words:

"Monsieur le Colonel is gone, then?"

Celia had always avoided speaking of Derek to her nurse, not feeling sure of her own voice and self-control. She did not, therefore, know whether he had taken the morning or the evening train for Paris. He was gone, and she was unspeakably desolate. Was it possible that she could miss him so much, this man who had caused her the deepest, the bitterest pain she had ever known? She said, cheerfully, however :

“I was not sure he would start till this morning. He will see my friends in London and send me a travelling companion, for, thanks to your good care, I shall soon be able to journey home, at least to my country,” she added, correcting herself, as she remembered she had no home.

“I shall miss my patient,” returned the doctor, kindly. “You must go out to-day; it is sunny and warm. The colonel and I had a discussion last night about your taking the air every day. He is much concerned about you and most anxious you should return to London. *Grand dieu!* it was a marvellous escape. One minute later, and both would have perished by a most ghastly death. It was superb, his bold attempt to save you, the porter told me. He had just returned to see that the child he had left there was safe, so he saw the colonel rush to raise you. There was a terrible moment when he seemed to waver with you in his arms, but by a superhuman effort he lifted you out of danger when the porter came to his assistance. The colonel has not yet recovered full strength. But I am an imbecile to talk of these things. You are white and faint. I believed you to be stronger, or I should not have spoken. Dear lady, forgive me.”

“You need not ask forgiveness. I am weak in mind. I have often pictured the scene to myself without feeling overcome, but your words seemed to give it a reality that—that was too much for me. Let us speak of something else,” said Celia, with an effort. There was a pause, and she resumed, more steadily, “I am quite pleased at the idea of going out.

Could you not come with me, my dear doctor? Your company would increase my enjoyment."

"Ah! that great pleasure is not for me, but I thank you for the gracious thought," he cried. "I am greatly occupied this afternoon. Your good nurse will take care of you," and, turning to the sister, he gave her some directions as to wrapping up the patient and the best road to take. Then, wishing Celia a good appetite and enjoining on her the necessity of taking a little champagne, he bowed himself out with old-fashioned courtesy.

Nothing could have assisted so potently to steady Celia's nerves as an hour in the open air, and she returned refreshed yet pleasantly tired. The country was pretty and the autumnal tints in their last stage of loveliness. The attendant sister was well acquainted with the local history. Her pleasant, quiet talk, therefore, interested her charge, and Celia regained a more cheerful mood than that in which she had set out. She was, nevertheless, glad to have a cup of tea and to be comfortably tucked up on the sofa, where sleep soon stole over her. When she woke she perceived by the light which was fast fading that she must have slept a considerable time. She was alone, too, and, feeling drowsy, she did not attempt to move. She lay there thinking, and, as the mists of sleep cleared away, began to live over again, as she had so often before, the events of the past fortnight. Was it well or ill for her to have met Derek? At all events, he had saved her life, and she loved life; saved it at the risk of his own. For this she must always be grateful, though it was an abstract kind of gratitude, for she did not know he had recognised her, and thought this great service had been virtually done to a stranger. Then he had restored to her the great blessing of independence. This, too, she quite perceived, was a relief and a gratification to him, as he would never have deigned to use the money which was really hers; but the thought and care he had shown her, the tone of his voice when he addressed

her, penetrated to her heart and created an agitation which broke up the strata of resolute renunciation and earnestly cultivated forgetfulness under which she had buried the past with which *he* was associated. Above and beyond all this, his air of having suffered both physically and mentally moved her deeply. He had such a sombre expression ; he looked so gaunt and haggard that she found herself longing to put aside her identity, and, for a few weeks at least, nurse him carefully into his natural condition of hardness and strength. It was very unaccountable, but, though he had shown her but scant consideration, the idea of his suffering affected her deeply. On the whole, their strange meeting was productive of much more pain than pleasure. All Celia's composure seemed gone. She could not look back with the quiet resignation she had taught herself to feel, and the idea of seeing Derek again or of never seeing him were alike unsatisfactory and disturbing.

"What a comfort it will be to speak to Lady Mary and Gertrude once more!" she thought. "The very sound of their voices will bring back my former self, which seems all gone to pieces, 'even as a broken mirror,' for I am sure my memory now makes 'a-thousand images of one that was.' I was so quiet and comparatively content, and now the contrast between the Derek of to-day and Derek of yesterday torments me. Why did he say so emphatically that no one living had any claim upon him? Did he never marry that unhappy woman who fled from her husband to him? I trust he did not behave basely to her. That would grieve me far more than any jealous pangs! It would be such a cruel disenchantment."

A visit from Madame Dulac put these reflections to flight, and a few questions concerning the places she had passed brought down a torrent of information on Celia's head. Anyhow, this helped to pass the evening, and then she slept soundly unvexed by dreams.

The next morning was grey and cloudy, and before Celia had finished dressing the threatening rain began to fall.

Celia was dreadfully disappointed. She had looked forward to another drive, another renewal of strength and vitality.

She kept herself by calculating Derek's movements. He had left by the mail-train on Tuesday night. He must then have reached London, allowing for all stoppages, last evening. This morning he would call on Lady Mary, and perhaps see Mrs. Maclean. How she hoped both would be kind and friendly. "But he will never tell them he risked his life to save mine," she reflected. "He would have done that for anyone. His care and thought for me after impressed me much more. Why was he so unjust and tyrannical? Why did he misunderstand me so cruelly? Ah! I did not misunderstand *him*. Had I sacrificed everything to keep him, I should never have had any peace or happiness."

So busily did her imagination suggest picture after picture of the meeting between Derek the delinquent and his estranged kinsfolk and acquaintance that she could not attend to her book, and, putting it by in despair, began to walk to and fro as a last resource. Then she watched Sister Monica knitting, and took a lesson in that manual game of patience as far as the eye and ear were concerned. After luncheon there was a momentary promise that the sun was going to favour them, but the clouds gathered thick again, and Celia resigned herself to stay in-doors. About four o'clock, when the "*impatient*" had contrived to fix her attention on a book, the landlady entered, smiling, a letter, or something like one, in her hand. "Une dépêche pour madame!" she exclaimed; and, trembling all over, Celia tore it open, and read:

"Will be with you to-morrow evening.—GERTRUDE."

"How good and kind! He has seen them then!" she exclaimed, aloud.

"Plait il?" said her nurse, smiling in sympathy with the

look of joy on her patient's face, while Celia re-read the telegram.

It would be all right when Gertrude came. She would help her to regain a steady foothold in the regions of reality and common sense ; and what pleasure to see her face again !

Excitement forbade sleep that night, and the next day seemed preternaturally long. But there were flowers to be arranged and an exquisite little dinner to order, and a more elaborate toilette to make ; also a short drive to be taken, as the day was fine. At last—at last the hour specified on the time-table arrived, but the train was late, and Celia was almost worn out before the sound of wheels and hoofs, the objurgations of an irritable jehu, and a rush of swift feet told her Gertrude had come. Another moment and she was in her arms.

* * * * *

“My dear Celia ! let me look at you. You are pale and worn ; still, you seem better than I expected after Derek's account. We had such a fright about you when we found you had not gone to Rome, but were wandering about in space somewhere.”

“And how infinitely good of you to come to me ! you who are the best travelling companion in the world !”

“Of course I came. At first, Lady Mary offered her services, but she knows nothing about travelling, so we suppressed her. Then, Derek ! Don't think me a traitor, but I *was* glad to see Derek ; and how ill he looks, poor fellow ! He insisted on your having a courier, and whom do you think I have with me ?”

“I cannot imagine.”

“Luigi ! your own Luigi. I went to see him. You know he is just married, and is going to start a small private hotel. I thought he might recommend a nice courier, and to my delight he offered to come himself.”

"Indeed, you are all too good to me, Gertrude" (a little unsteadily). "Now, not another word till you have taken off your things and eaten your dinner."

These conditions fulfilled, the two friends sat down by a large wood-fire, for the nights were cold, and indulged in a delightful outpouring of news. After explaining why she had not accompanied the Miltons to Rome, Celia passed on to her extraordinary escape.

"You can imagine my amazement on finding to whom I owed my life," she continued, "and no doubt Colonel Grantley was equally surprised to discover who it was he had rescued."

"No," said Mrs. Maclean; "Derek says he recognised you the moment you entered the restaurant, and seems to have been a good deal cut up to observe that you were travelling quite alone. He followed you on to the platform partly with a vague intention of offering to be of use to you, and had not the pluck to address you and face the chance of a rebuff."

"Then he knew me; he knew for whom he was risking his life?" cried Celia.

"Certainly he did."

There was a pause. Then Celia said, slowly, as if to herself, "I hope the Damers received him kindly."

"They did, I assure you. They were so delighted to know you were safe, so pleased to find you would have a little something to live upon, that, for the moment at least, they seemed to lose sight of his delinquencies. I often wonder why you did not get on better."

"Well, do you know, so do I." There was a pause, and Celia resumed, "I often wonder what became of that poor soul who was the means of giving me liberty."

"I do not believe that Derek ever married her."

"I am afraid not. I am afraid he is not very chivalrous."

"Don't say that. He used to be."

"There is no use in conjecturing about him," exclaimed

Celia, impatiently. "He has gone out of my life completely."

"I suppose so," said Mrs. Maclean, with a sigh. "At any rate, you will no longer be obliged to take care of partially insane young ladies ; but make a pretty little home for yourself. In London, of course?"

"I do not know. I cannot plan anything in my present frame of mind. My experience with that poor Sibbie Milton was very curious. It suggested all sorts of ideas about the 'will,' the power of exercising it, free will and responsibility. I should like to talk to George Preston about it all. It is always delightful to talk to him."

"Yes. Do you know when you lost your money I was longing for you to marry him?"

"I was nearer doing so than you think, but something within me forbade the banns."

"Perhaps it was all for the best."

"I rather think that our destinies are fixed, however we may fancy we have the liberty of choice."

It was very delightful to open her heart once more to a friend so true, so sympathetic, and they talked on till Sister Monica came to insist on "madame" retiring to bed. Even there the sense of companionship, the companionship of a strong, capable woman was infinitely comforting and soothing. Celia grew stronger and brighter every day. It was quite delightful to go out driving with Gertrude beside her and Luigi on the box, as in the old days which seemed pushed away quite a century back. Still, there was less of hope in Celia's views and utterances than there used to be. She was not ready to build little air-castles or plan small palaces picturesquely furnished and harmoniously coloured for her future occupation.

"The only thing I seem to want is rest," she said a day or two after Mrs. Maclean's arrival, as they sat together after dinner.

"That speech is not like you, Celia. I believe the great

shock you have had has affected you more than you know. I shall be glad to have you under my husband's care. Though I say it, who should not, he has the gift of healing besides all his knowledge and practice."

"I am sure he has. Oh! once I am in something of a home of my own, Gertrude, I shall be myself again. Yes, I have been a good deal shaken. Let us not speak any more of that dreadful day."

Though not yet as strong as he would have liked, the friendly doctor saw it was better that his patient should return to England, so, after an almost affectionate leave-taking with her nurse and hosts, Celia and her friend started on the appointed day, the former leaving the scene of her hairbreadth 'scape with a curious mixture half relief and half regret.

CHAPTER XXIX.

It was a chill, drizzling night when Mrs. Maclean and her charge reached R—— Square.

"Dear, dirty, delightful London!" exclaimed Celia. "There is no place like it. I feel as if I had been *years* away."

"You are looking terribly wan and weary. How do you feel, dear?"

"Tired, of course; but I shall be all right to-morrow."

"I hope so," returned Mrs. Maclean. "But I fear the doctor will never forgive me for not making a longer halt in Paris."

In another minute they were at their journey's end, and the doctor himself was assisting Celia to alight, while behind him stood the well-known figure of Francks.

"Welcome, my dear Mrs. Rivers!" exclaimed the doctor, coming to assist his "favoured guest" to alight. "Terribly tired, eh? Here's an old friend ready to attend to you."

"Ah, doctor! so glad to be with you again. Why, Francks! this is an unexpected pleasure. How do you come here?" holding out her hand to her former maid.

"Dear ma'am, I *am* glad to see you. Her ladyship desired me to be here to wait on you, and sends her love. She will not disturb you till to-morrow, as she fears you will be over-fatigued."

"How good and thoughtful she is! Oh, Francks! how nice to have you about me again!"

"Dear, dear! you look fit to drop, 'm."

"Take off your wraps in the study," said the doctor, authoritatively. "You must go to your room directly you have eaten your dinner."

And Celia obeyed, so far as sitting down to table went; but Maclean was vexed to see how little food she could take; nor did she speak much, listening with interest to what her companions said.

The doctor's first piece of news was, "Riversdale's approaching marriage is officially announced to-day."

"Indeed!" cried his wife. "To Jessie, I suppose?"

"Yes; it is to take place early in the new year. I fancy Lady Mary will be quite pleased. She is a great advocate of marriage."

"Naturally," said Celia. "Her own has been an ideal married life."

"Riversdale will make an excellent husband," observed Mrs. Maclean.

"Yes, to a certain kind of woman," returned the doctor. "But he would bore an intellectual woman, and she would bore him."

"I fancy the bride he has selected does not possess too much brain-power," added his wife. "She is a bright, red-

haired, freckled, joyous, common-sensical girl, destined by nature to be the wife of a country squire."

"I do hope Riversdale will be happy," said Celia."

"And now, my dear lady, you are not eating; so I shall send you to bed," commanded the doctor.

Celia was thankful to obey, though she did not anticipate a good night. It was delightful to have her faithful Francks fussing round her and showing her familiarity with her mistress's little ways. "And my lady says, 'm, she does not intend to keep me if you would like to have me back; though I must say I should never leave her, if it were not to come back to *you*," Francks was saying when Celia interrupted her thoughts to listen.

"Lady Mary is wonderfully considerate, Francks; and, now that I believe I shall be able to afford a lady's maid, I shall gladly have you back again, only we must not inconvenience Lady Mary; and I have grown wonderfully self-helpful; only just now, of course, I want a good deal of assistance."

"Ah! dear Mrs. Rivers, her ladyship and me, we had a good cry together when she told me how near you were to being killed, and we both thanked God for sending the captain—I mean colonel—home in the nick of time to save your life."

"Thank you, Francks. I am sure you would have been sorry never to have seen me again."

"Sorry is not the word, 'm. Now, have you everything you want? I shall be quite near. The doctor has had a bed put in the little dressing-room there, and I'll leave the door open between us, and I'll wake directly you call. Good-night, 'm, and I do hope you'll sleep."

Celia, full of thoughts, memories, strange, disturbing anticipations, feared the kindly wish would be unfulfilled; but she had hardly begun to wrestle with her constant mental tendency to live that fearful moment in the railway station over again, when sleep stole over her and restful oblivion soothed

her strained nerves. The night's repose lasted till near morning, yet Celia was disappointed she did not feel more refreshed. Her limbs ached, her throat felt dry and sore. She said little of this, however, as she wished to go down-stairs to receive Lady Mary, and the joy of meeting her acted as a stimulant. Her pale cheeks were flushed, and she looked remarkably well.

"I need not ask you if you slept, dear," exclaimed Mrs. Maclean when Celia came into the drawing-room; "you look a new creature."

"I slept much better than I expected. It was so nice to hear the rattle of the morning milk-cans and the cry of 'sweep!' It is absurd how long it seems since I parted with you all."

"So it does to me," began Mrs. Maclean.

Here Lady Mary was announced, and greeted Celia effusively, the warmth of her welcome glowing through the usual gentle composure of her manners.

"I am pleased and surprised to see you look so well, dear Celia, after the great shock you must have had," she said as she sat down beside the invalid and took her hand.

"I do not think the doctor is quite satisfied with her," put in Mrs. Maclean; "and he says she must be kept exceedingly quiet. I think we had better not talk of her rescue or escape, deeply as we may be interested in it."

"Perhaps not," said Celia. "In fact, I find it impossible to keep it out of my head, so I would rather speak of anything else. Tell me about Mr. Damer and the children."

"Mr. Damer is coming here presently to speak for himself, and the children (who would be highly offended if they heard themselves so described) are most flourishing. Jack has been absolutely head of his class for a month or more. You can imagine papa's exultation. We were rather afraid Jack would be a dunce."

Then the conversation rambled away to Riversdale's marriage and the gossip concerning it, to the Miltons, and many such topics, but not quite so freely as of yore. In fact, the three friends were conscious of the necessity of avoiding one subject that was really uppermost in the mind of each. That was the erring Derek. They were all afraid to mention him, yet each was anxious to know what the other thought. At last, after a brief pause, Lady Mary said :

"I am afraid I must go home on Thursday, Celia. But I do not intend to leave without a promise from you to come to us for Christmas, or as soon as our good doctor's treatment has set you up."

"I fear I cannot promise that. I do not think it would quite do for me to go to the Court," returned Celia, a little unsteadily ; "at least just now. You say Riversdale is to be with you, and—and I should be so sorry to prevent your asking Derek—I mean Colonel Grantley. Of course, we must not, cannot meet. I have no enmity to him, not a bit, but it is disturbing. I do not feel strong enough for it. It would be unpleasant, too, for him."

"Oh, yes, of course," cried Lady Mary ; "besides outraging all the *convenances*. But one must not be always unforgiving ; and I am sure no one could be more truly sorry for the past than Derek—not that he says much about it, but he shows it in many ways. Still, however forgiving you both may be, it is impossible you could meet, except——"

"Colonel Grantley !" said Dr. Maclean's solemn manservant, who looked like Esculapius himself out of livery.

A sudden silence fell on the three ladies, and a slight smile played on Mrs. Maclean's lips as the delinquent walked boldly into the room and shook hands with his cousin and Mrs. Maclean. Then, bowing formally to Celia, he said, "I did not quite expect to see you, or I should not have intruded ; but the doctor's account of you last night was not quite satisfactory, and I hoped to hear from Mrs. Maclean that a night's

rest had set you up. At all events, here I am, and I hope my presence is not—that is—does not annoy you.”

“I should be very ungrateful if it did, only——” and Celia paused.

“Yes—yes, I know it’s not the correct thing,” he interrupted; “but I leave town to-night and shall not offend again.”

“Now you *are* here,” said Gertrude, “pray tell us something of your plans and movements.”

“Plans? Oh, I haven’t any. I feel as if I had no rudder. But I must go down to Wallingford. They tell me the place has been allowed to go to pieces during poor old Grantley’s last years; so, as I suppose I must live there chiefly in the future, it must be repaired and done up. In fact, it needs a small fortune to put both house and grounds in order.”

“Well, as you have the fortune, it will be a most interesting occupation,” said Lady Mary.

“It will not interest me much. *You* must come up and give me a tip what to do. I am an ignoramus as to houses and decorations. I do understand a stable; beyond that I am nowhere.”

“Very well. I will give you the benefit of my advice.”

“And do you feel all right this morning?” was Grantley’s next question, turning to look full into Celia’s eyes.

“I cannot say I am quite myself, but I am very pleased to be in London again and under Dr. Maclean’s care. I shall soon be quite well and ready to take up life again.”

“It has been an unusual interregnum for you,” observed Mrs. Maclean.

“You never were one of the fanciful invalid sort,” added Grantley.

Celia looked up; their eyes met, and an amused smile flashed over her speaking face, but his kept still and grave.

“It strikes me,” he said, “that you are no great things as to strength. I fancy you want a good bit of looking after,

and I do not doubt you will have it. I have just parted with Damer. He is coming on to see you, but had to keep an appointment with old Ridley on your business."

"I seem to give a good deal of trouble," said Celia, languidly, as if very weary.

"No; that is, no one thinks your affairs a trouble. I am the troublesome party, so I had better be off."

"I do not see why you need," exclaimed Mrs. Maclean.

"You are very good, but I am out of place here." He rose and took leave abruptly.

"I have always heard that Derek was rather a daring soldier, but he has proved his pluck to-day. To walk in here in cold blood and face Celia before you and me was a deed of 'derringdo' few men would be equal to."

"Oh! Derek would face anything if he set his mind to succeed in what he wanted very much. I must say, though, he does not deserve it. I am very, very sorry for him. He has not spoilt your life, Celia, half as much as he spoilt his own. He was *really* anxious to know how you are, for Derek is incapable of assuming anything. I hope he will soon make a better choice."

"I don't want to see him any more; no, not any more," cried Celia.

Here, to the amazement of her friends, she burst into a fit of almost hysterical weeping, and was swept away to her own room by her friends, amid indignant comments on Grantley's unpardonable want of thought and consideration and common sense, and many other useful and superior qualities.

In fact, Celia, being still in a low, nervous condition, had taken a severe chill, and for a few days Dr. Maclean was rather anxious about her.

"You see, it is a sort of attack that might turn to anything," he said to his wife. "Above all things, we must keep up her strength."

Gertrude and the faithful Francks nursed Celia devotedly,

but it was more than a fortnight before she was fit to leave her room, and then she was weak and pallid and so quiet, so silent, that the doctor was by no means satisfied with her progress towards recovery.

Lady Mary was settled at home, and hardly knew how ill her favourite friend had been, nor did Grantley. But almost daily supplies of fruit and flowers arrived at R—— Square from the Wallingford hot-houses, of which Celia knew nothing, for Mrs. Maclean never mentioned Derek's name to the invalid, who thought, if she thought of them at all, that all these dainties came from Covent Garden or Damer Court. Grantley wrote more than once to his old playfellow for tidings of her guest, but she gave him very brief replies.

Christmas was over. A spell of raw, drizzling, east-windy weather had set in, and the doctor fumed because Celia was unable to go out, for he had great faith in the effects of air and exercise.

"You will never pick up strength here," he exclaimed, almost angrily, as he sat with his wife and patient one evening after dinner. "You must get away. There is a bright, sheltry little nook with pine-woods at the back of it not far from B——. It is only three or four hours from town. I went there to see old Sir Peter Higgins. The air is delightful, and there is a nice, homely hotel. Just the place for you. You and Gertrude shall go down there the day after to-morrow. I am certain you want change and lots of fresh air to blow away the cobwebs that are smothering your natural good spirits and capacity for enjoyment. Mind, wife, you have everything ready for a start on Thursday morning. I'll write for rooms this moment."

"And what is the name of this wonderful place?" asked Mrs. Maclean.

"Sandford-on-Sea."

"I remember. You talked about its many charms when you came back from your visit to Sir Peter. Well, I shall

have everything ready. We don't seem to think it necessary to ask Celia's consent."

"Oh! take me anywhere; do anything you like with me, if only you can restore my vitality," exclaimed Celia. "I feel only half alive. I earnestly hope it is not a very expensive place."

"Celia is always thinking of the pennies," said Mrs. Maclean, laughing.

"And a wise-like woman she is. That's the way to pile up the pounds."

They then proceeded to discuss details, and on all points the doctor's will prevailed.

"Of course, when I see Celia comfortably settled, I will come back," said Mrs. Maclean, resolutely.

"Yes, of course," echoed Celia. "I must not return evil for good and rob my dear doctor of his sunshine."

"We'll go halves," he returned. "Whenever I can get away from Saturday to Sunday night, we'll run down to see you, and I expect three or four weeks will set you up."

CHAPTER XXX.

A BRISK, bright, frosty afternoon midway in January had filled London's thoroughfares with a busy throng, when two men met at the corner of Charles and Regent's Streets.

"Rivers!" exclaimed one.

"Why, Preston!" said the other.

"I am truly glad to see you."

"I can hardly believe that," returned the second, with a grim smile.

"You may then," said Preston. "We are all glad to see

you. We are all grateful to you for saving a life we value so highly, we of the old Riversdale set."

"I did what any man would have done for any woman, or any man for that matter; only if Ce—Mrs. Rivers had been a trifle heavier, we'd have gone smash together. I had been pulled down by fever and was as weak as a rat. It would have been a dramatic ending to the story, wouldn't it, eh?" concluded Derek. "Which way are you going? I'll come with you if you don't mind; gad, it's jolly to see your pale face again."

They turned towards Pall Mall and walked for a minute or two in silence.

"Do you remember our meeting at this spot; how long ago? Nearly seven years, I think, and you took me back with you to luncheon?"

"Why do you choose such devilish disagreeable topics?" replied Derek. "You don't suppose I enjoy looking back?"

"Well, no; but I fancy there is a pleasant prospect before you. I have only just returned from Cypress, and heard that you have succeeded to the Grantley property, and that you are to have the 'Bath' and other honours."

"These things are most unjustly distributed. Don't congratulate me. As soon as I put my affairs in order I think of leaving England."

"Somehow I don't fancy you will," said Preston, slowly, and, as if to himself, "I am sorry to find Mrs. Rivers is still far from strong. I have just been lunching with Mrs. Maclean, and——"

"I know nothing. None of them will give me any news about—about Celia."

"Probably Mrs. Maclean and Lady Mary think it kinder and more polite to avoid all mention of her name."

"Well, they are wrong. I may have acted brutally under strong irritation, but I am not a brute right through. What did you hear? Did you see Mrs. Rivers?"

"Oh, no. They have taken her down to Sandford-on-Sea."

"Where? Who?" interrupted Derek, eagerly.

"The doctor and Mrs. Maclean. He feared she would never get rid of the low fever that was consuming her in London. Sandford is a mere fishing-village, with one hotel, on the coast of Dorset, warm, sheltered, etc. Maclean thinks Mrs. Rivers is picking up a little. They have been down to see her two or three times."

Derek did not speak for a few minutes, but pulled his moustache reflectively.

"You were great friends with my—no, not my wife," and he laughed, and there was a sound of pain in his laughter.

"I saw a great deal of her in the last few years, and there is no one for whom I had a greater respect and regard. She is a charming companion." He stopped abruptly, a flush passing over his pallid face.

"It is strange to me that she never married. I suppose she had lots of offers," said Derek.

"A good many—some that didn't count; two or three that were in deadly earnest. Her refusal of everyone was not strange to me. I know her too well. I don't think she ever felt herself unmarried."

A long silence followed. At length Rivers, or Grantley, said, "It is hard to believe that. I have felt myself extremely *un*married. I say, Preston, your diggin's are somewhere about here?"

"They are in Duke Street."

"Let me have a smoke and a talk with you there. I can't say all I want to say in the street."

"I shall be very happy; come along."

That evening, coming in from a dinner at his club, to which he had been unanimously re-elected, Grantley abruptly told his valet to put up enough clothes for a few days. "I am going out of town to-morrow morning," he added. "I

don't want you. Here is a list of commissions which you can do during my absence."

To the man's surprise, his master declined his attendance even to the station, though, indeed, Colonel Grantley never wanted much waiting on.

* * * * *

"Sandford" did not belie the doctor's recommendation. It was a little fishing-hamlet clustered on the shore of a creek, which narrowed as it ran inland from a wide bay. The sides of this fiord were steep and rocky, sheltering the picturesque little place; and further up the valley or gorge, where the space was wider, stood a low, rambling edifice known as the "Rock Hotel;" behind it stretched a pine-wood, which filled the rest of the glen and sloped upward to the level of the table-land above.

Of a sunny day the odour of the pines, mingled with the sweet, salt fragrance of the sea-air, made a delicious atmosphere.

There were few visitors at the hotel, but among them Mrs. Maclean found a couple of acquaintances—Mrs. Langford, an Anglo-Indian widow, and her niece, pleasant, travelled, but somewhat surface people, who were charmed to be on friendly terms with Mrs. Rivers, and relieved her doctor from the fear of leaving her dependent on Francks only for society.

The first few days were dry and bright, and Celia seemed and was decidedly better. She shared a carriage with her new acquaintances and enjoyed driving through the pretty country which lay inland. She wrote cheerfully to the doctor and his wife, and almost believed that she was going to be her own contented, common-sense self again. But this illusion did not last long. The dreamy disinclination to work or study or regular employment of any kind came back to her; either she lay hours awake, or, when she fell asleep soon, she woke long before daylight and was unable to close her

eyes again. Her appetite was capricious and her strength refused to return. Poor Francks was much disappointed. She expected wonders from the sea-air, the freshness, the absence of biting winds.

Celia, however, though she made no complaint, well knew she was very little better than she had been. Moreover, she knew why her vitality seemed ebbing from her, why life seemed colourless and tasteless. Since she had seen Derek and thanked him for the life he had saved, her former love for him had returned with overwhelming strength. He looked so worn and sad that something of tender compassion softened the bitterness which his desertion had left to corrode her heart. Since he had spoken with her, since their eyes had met in a long, lingering gaze full of grief for the past and hopelessness for the future, her ears had thirsted for the sound of his voice, her eyes were aching for a sight of his dark face. He might be rugged and stern, but his tenderness was heaven. And how gentle, how tender he could be ! He had taught her what love was, and she could never unlearn the lesson. Not even the selfish injustice of his conduct could uproot the passion he had inspired. Yet she never, even in thought, was so false to herself as to wish she had acted differently. "He was wrong," she thought, "and self-respect demanded that I should resist." Then she cried shame upon herself for her weakness. "Why does his presence affect me so cruelly ? George Preston is superior to Derek in many ways, perhaps in all ways." He was really a more suitable companion, one who charmed and interested her intellectually far more than Derek ever did, yet he was nothing, less than nothing to her, compared to this rather tyrannical, unreasonable man, whose personality drew her to him electrically. Was this the result of nearly six years' mental development and, she flattered herself, improvement ; that judgment, common sense, experience were routed at the first onset by—what?—instinct, a naturally weak character ? Well, she was not weaker than her neigh-

bours. Still, it was a painful weakness. He haunted her sleeping and waking. If she could gather a little more physical strength, she would be better able to resist this almost demoniacal possession, and she *would* resist it. She would fight a good fight and regain her self-mastery. With some such noble resolution she generally fell asleep to dream of Derek, to wake with the painful sense that he was far away, that she might never see him again.

Soon after the Macleans' last visit her new acquaintances, Mrs. Langford and her niece, were called away by the illness of the latter's father, and Celia was not sorry to be left to herself, though she was well aware that loneliness was very bad for her. She had taken quite a long walk (for her) on the beach with Francks, with whom she forced herself to talk cheerfully about taking a small flat or upper part of a house and furnishing it. "If I can be sure that the creditors of the bank would not take it all," she added, laughing.

"Dear, dear 'm, that would be too bad," ejaculated Francks.

"I must write to Mr. Ridley about it, and ask Mrs. Maclean to find us temporary quarters. Would you like to go back to London, Francks?" she concluded.

Francks assured her of her readiness to go anywhere that suited Mrs. Rivers. This brought them to the entrance of the hotel, where the porter was removing a portmanteau from a fly which stood before the door, someone having just arrived.

"This is quite exciting," said Celia. "I thought that you and I were the last roses of winter. If the new arrival is our dear doctor, I shall find him in my sitting-room. I am wonderfully little tired, but I am inclined for my luncheon."

As soon as the midday meal was over, Celia settled herself to write both to Mr. Ridley and Gertrude. Francks, having attended to her mistress's wants, had retired to take her own

dinner, when Celia was startled by the entrance of a waiter who solemnly presented her with a card which bore this inscription: "Colonel D. Rivers Grantley, Travellers' Club," above which was written in pencil, "Pray be so good as to see me."

Celia's heart beat hard. It was a terribly sudden realization of what she would not allow herself to hope for.

"Where is the gentleman?" she asked.

"He is waiting in the hall, 'm."

"Show him up," she exclaimed, with sudden decision, and, rising, she moved to a seat near the window with her back to the light.

In another minute "Colonel Grantley" was announced, and Derek stood before her.

"I have to apologise for intruding on you," he began, abruptly; "I see that my presence is disturbing and unwelcome, but——" He paused.

"Why have you come here, Colonel Grantley?" she asked.

There was something pathetic in the question.

"I have kept away as long as I could," he exclaimed, but there is an incident in the past which I want to explain to you. I am consumed with the desire to tell you the truth about it. If you will give me a hearing, I will never trouble you again unless you willingly permit me."

"Could you not write what you have to say?" she asked, in an unsteady voice.

"You would do me a great favour if you would hear it," he said, earnestly. "I should learn more of what you really thought from your face than your lips would ever tell."

"But, Colonel Grantley, you must know it is an extraordinary proceeding to come here to visit me. We ought not to meet."

"Perhaps not; but it is 'we' between us still. After you

have heard me I will never trespass again. There are no two people so far apart and yet so near as you and I."

There was a short pause. Then Celia said, in a low voice, "What is it you wish to say?"

"I want to clear myself in your eyes of deliberate wrongdoing, which I think I can."

She bent her head, and Colonel Grantley drew a chair near the window in which she sat. There was a short pause, and Celia heard the soft rush of the wavelets on the beach and the murmur of their backward sweep, the sighing of the soft breeze among the pines, and the metallic ring of the capstan as some sailors were raising the anchor of a little vessel in the harbour below. She never heard those sounds again without seeing Derek's set face and recalling the painful tension of that pause.

"I gathered from an expression of yours when we met at L—— that you fancied I might be married, and hearing, as I suppose you have heard, I am not, you may think I have behaved in a dastardly fashion to the woman who trusted and threw herself on my protection. I want to put the facts of that unfortunate affair before you. It is a curious topic to dilate on to you, but you will bear with me? When part of my regiment was sent up to Chaudrapur, nearly two years after we parted, a native regiment was quartered there; and among its officers was a Captain Lambert, a big and rather good-looking man in a heavy, physical style, or he had been good-looking when he was younger and drank less. His wife had been a very pretty woman, with splendid eyes, but so inanimate, so crushed, that I must say I found it painful to look at her. There were very few women in the station, and not one of them would have anything to do with her. The fact is, it was well known that three or four years before a certain Englishman in the civil service was her lover, and she believed he would take her away from her wretched life with Lambert, who was about the biggest brute that ever

lived. But her lover returned to England alone, and soon after made a wealthy marriage. 'There never was so unlucky a woman in this world as Mrs. Lambert. Husband and lover both base, quite unable to stand alone, craving for love and receiving only disguised indifference, she was left to the tyranny of her husband, who kept her with him to torment and revenge himself upon her. Had she an ounce of pluck, she would have put an end to herself. She was, I fancy, of humble birth, and did not seem to have a friend or relative anywhere.'

"What a cruel picture!" said Celia, with a shiver.

"I will not dwell on it," he returned. "I seldom met this unfortunate woman. When I did, of course I behaved like a gentleman to her; perhaps some of the compassion I felt showed in my manner. At all events, she spoke a little more to me than she usually did. At last there came a night when Lambert was more furiously drunk than usual. He made a murderous attack upon his wife. She fled for refuge to my bungalow (the nearest). Here Lambert followed. I need not tell you we had a desperate struggle. I would not give her up, and not a soul would believe that I wasn't her lover. There never was a more mistaken idea. The only feeling she excited in my mind was pity, not untinged with contempt. If she had jammed a knife into that fellow Lambert, I should have thought better of her; nor did she feel anything for me but a kind of humble gratitude. Still, everything was against her; she hadn't a penny. Her husband would not take her back; indeed, her life would not have been safe with him, and she got ill with fever, not a high, raging fever, but a low, consuming sort of malady. It was the hot season, and one of our sergeant's wives was going up to the hills with her little girl. I arranged for her to take this unhappy creature, too. She was the saddest sight I ever saw, despised and rejected, too weak to be true to herself, and of no value to any living creature."

"Ah, Derek! I hope you were very kind and gentle to her," cried Celia, tear-drops gemming her long, dark eyelashes. "I wish I had been there to help you."

"I wish to God you had. Then you believe me?"

"I never doubted a word you said; you ought to know that."

Grantley rose and walked away to the door and back in silence; then he sat down and resumed, "The sergeant's wife returned with her child, but I settled that poor Mrs. Lambert should stay with a capital old missionary from some dissenting concern and his wife. Then you brought your suit against me. I did not defend it. It was impossible to rehabilitate my unhappy *protégé*, and all I could do was to put no obstacle to your regaining your liberty."

"Which was very much my motive in seeking to break our marriage. I wished to set you free to marry the woman I thought you loved," said Celia, in a low tone.

"Ah! we were equally benevolent towards one another. Well, the missionary wrote to me that he thought his guest was sinking, and said she often expressed a wish to see me; so I went up to the hills, and found my poor friend marvelously changed. I am not a religious man, but I cannot doubt that faith works miracles. The change in Mrs. Lambert was extraordinary. She was sinking; that was evident, but her face was transfigured. There was a glow of life and hope, an indescribable peace in it, such as I had never seen there before. The old missionary had talked to her of the love of Christ, of the joys of heaven, the supreme value of the poorest human life in the eyes of God, till the poor crushed soul revived, and the despair of this life was changed to the hope of everlasting peace. If that good old man had never done anything else but soothe that fainting soul, he had not lived in vain."

Derek, who had rarely spoken so much at one time, paused for an instant and then resumed. "She passed away two days

later, her hand in mine. Just before speech failed her she said, 'You are the only man who has ever been kind to me.' I was thankful to see her at rest."

There was a profound silence. Then Celia, pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, said, in a low, unsteady voice:

"I am glad you were so good to her, Derek; very, very glad. What a pitiful tale! It makes my heart ache to think of it."

"There are few like yours," murmured Grantley; "and you believe me?"

"Implicitly."

He rose and walked slowly to and fro.

"I do not want to seem better than I am. I did not try. I did not especially intend to be faithful to you. I expected from day to day to see the announcement of your marriage in the papers, but I don't think I was ever much given to falling in love. Indeed, I feel now that I never gave you the highest, the best kind of love. I believe in those days I was incapable of understanding, of appreciating the fine nature which underlay the exuberance of your early youth, and now I suffer from the effects of my dense stupidity, and you——"

"And I suffer from having loved too deeply, too truly the man I thought you were," cried Celia, her eyes aglow, her lips quivering, rising from her chair and leaning against the projecting side of the bay-window. "I am thankful that I am partly justified by the story you have just told, for it is even more bitter, more cruel than even the conviction that you *could* not love me, to believe that you were narrowly selfish."

"Not love you?" said Derek. "That is the most intolerable part of my punishment. I love you now, perhaps too late, as I never loved you or anyone before. I feel as if I could not face life without you. I have convinced you, you say, that there was no real reason for your divorcing me, and you say you once loved me well. Is there no hope for

me? Can we not atone to each other for the past? I will not live in England if you will not once more be my wife. I shall place my home, my lands, in the care of an agent and wander to and fro. That is why I came here, as a forlorn hope——”

“This is absolute madness!” she interrupted, growing very white as she spoke. “Just think what a failure our first attempt at union was; and, besides, it would be impossible, set apart as you and I have been by law.”

“There you are mistaken. We were simply set free to marry whom we chose, and, if we choose each other, no one can oppose us.”

“And if we make each other miserable again, who will set us free? We dare not complain,” exclaimed Celia, an irrepressible smile curving her lip and stealing into her eyes.

“Can you smile at such a question which to me is of such desperate importance?” said Derek, his brow contracting. “My whole future hangs on your decision, my life is in your hands.”

“I dare not risk repeating what I have already suffered; do not ask me!” she cried, and she wrung her hands as if in pain. “You were very fond of me once, and yet it all faded away. Why should not *this* fancy die out too?”

“Yes, the *fancy* did die out; I acknowledge that. I did not even think of you much, though at times the memory of your sweetness and fairness used to come over me like a breath from freshly mown meadows; but now I hunger and thirst for your companionship, for the unspeakable bliss of your love. I have made your youth a stormy, wintry summer. Let me atone by striving to give you ‘a golden autumn.’ Celia, it is not wise to say me ‘no,’ nor is it easy, my darling.”

She was trembling from head to foot, but she dreaded to commit herself. She might, perhaps, have yielded had she not been alarmed at the passion his words, his eager eyes

roused in her heart. "I must not be weak, I must be true to myself," she told herself, "and it is too great a risk."

"Pray, leave me, Colonel Grantley," she said, brokenly. "I am not equal to this agitation ; and you, too, you ought to think well before you undertake so perilous a venture."

"Good God ! I have never thought of anything else since my eyes rested on you in that restaurant at L——. I was indeed mad when I lost you through my infernal pride and obstinacy."

"Had we lived on together, Derek, we should have been by this time far more irrevocably parted than we are now."

"Possibly, for we are by no means irrevocably parted. But I am a brute to persist when you look ready to faint. I will leave you."

"Yes, do, and put me out of your mind," she said, in gasps.

He laughed.

"That is so easy ! Well, I will intrude no longer. I fear I have lost you. If you want to consult your friends, the Damers and Macleans, I *know* the former and I suspect the latter would back me up. But I, even I, passionately as I long for you, must not humiliate myself uselessly. Give me a word of kindness or final rejection to-morrow and I will never offend you more by my presence."

"Is it not needless pain ?" began Celia.

"Not a word more," he interrupted, raising his hand. "Let me prolong my torture, if I choose, till to-morrow, when it will be either a blessed reunion or good-bye forever, as you decide."

He turned and left the room. Celia could no longer stand. She threw herself on the sofa and tried to think, but her ideas seemed in a wild tangle. She could do nothing but struggle against an intense longing to abandon herself to the hope of at least a year or two of brilliant happiness with the man she loved. But what after, if, as was not improbable, he again

quarrelled with her and she liked her own way as well as ever, if not better, after these years of uncontrolled free will? She would be a supremely ridiculous figure, no longer deserving sympathy or respect. Where could she turn if Derek again forsook her? Indeed, her position would be worse than before, for they could not with any decency break their bonds again. But how sweet it was to hear him say how much he loved her, to read confirmation of his words in his grave, earnest eyes. Yes, at this moment he did love her. How should she endure the hours which must pass before she could again look into their dark depths?

"Here are your letters, 'm," said Francks, coming in with several on a salver, having seized them from a waiter in order to have an interview with her mistress a little sooner.

"Dear, dear, 'm, you do look bad. Let me fetch you a glass of wine."

"Do, Francks. I feel as if I were going to die."

"And no wonder, 'm," cried Francks, indignantly; "if you will excuse me, to think that you should be harried and molested in this way. I do think the captain might have been too shamefaced to come and worry you. To think of what you have suffered all along of his conduct."

"You forget," said Celia, with a pale smile, "that I would not be here at all but for Colonel Grantley."

"Well, 'm, any decent sort of a man would do that for any woman; and then to come and talk to you after his goings on in India. I never knew anything so audacious."

"That will do, Francks! Get me a glass of wine."

* * * * *

When Celia rose next morning she felt more exhausted than refreshed. She had scarcely closed her eyes. Her heart and brain were torn by the struggle between reason and irrepressible affection. The words spoken by Francks had suggested to her the view society would take if she yielded, and the

deeply rooted doubt as to the permanence of Derek's present passion for her made her persuade herself that her only consistent, her only dignified course was to refuse him.

Soon after breakfast a hired carriage drew up at the entrance, which was beneath Celia's rooms, and one of the waiters lounged down the steps to talk with the driver. Celia knew quite well it was there to take Derek away; and while she thought that he was not going to lose time, his card was brought with a request that he might be permitted to see her.

It was at once granted.

"You have not slept," was his first greeting. "Why do you torment yourself as you do? Surely you believe me; you say you never doubt my word."

"Your word! no; but I doubt if you can answer for yourself."

"Is it to be good-bye or not?" said Grantley, with grim directness.

"I believe that would be the wisest course," said Celia, who was quivering from head to foot.

"It is not a question of wisdom," said Derek, slowly. "Is it the course you wish to adopt?"

"It is," almost in a whisper.

He did not reply immediately; then walked to the window and stood half a minute looking out. "I have no more to urge," he said, coming back and facing her; "nor have I any right to complain of your decision." Another pause and a long look into her eyes, while a grey paleness, a look of despair came over his face. "Good-bye, Celia; God bless you and send you 'a golden autumn,' though I may not share it." He did not attempt to touch her hand, but walked quickly to the door. Before he turned the handle, a cry from Celia arrested his hand.

"Come back, Derek! I cannot let you go, for I love you dearly."

"My God! Celia, is it true? Will you be my wife, my own beloved?"

She was in his arms once more, strained almost painfully to his breast, his lips clinging to hers in a long, rapturous kiss, till he was half frightened by the violent trembling of her slight frame, and drew her down beside him on the sofa.

"Wise or unwise, Derek," she whispered, "I will risk re-union. I make no conditions, only try not to weary of me so soon *this* time."

* * * * *

There are few such moments as this in existence, and Celia, full to the lips with life as she was, had never known joy so complete, so entrancing. The married ~~un~~married lovers were brought back to every-day realities by the entrance of the waiter.

"If you please, sir, I'm afraid you have missed your train. There isn't another till——"

"Train!" echoed Grantley, gazing in a bewildered manner at the man; "I don't want to leave to-day. Send away the carriage or whatever you call it."

"Very well, sir."

"You will go up to town to-morrow?" asked Celia.

"Yes, if you will come with me?"

"I hardly like to do that, Derek."

"And I don't like letting you out of my sight until I have regained my position as your husband."

"How is it you are so sure the Damers' would like us to re-marry?"

"Because Damer told me so after I explained things. But the man that persuaded me to hope was Preston. He knows you well, Celia; and he's a right good fellow."

"He is indeed. I am so fond of George Preston."

* * * * *

It is not necessary to insult the intelligent reader with further details. Within a month of their coming to this happy

understanding Celia and Grantley were again man and wife, and the following season Mrs. Rivers Grantley was quite the rage, while invitations to Wallingford were eagerly accepted.

What the inner life of the owners might be no outsider could certainly know ; but if sunny looks and an indescribable air of profound and tranquil happiness can be accepted as proof, Celia and her faulty partner enjoyed without alloy the serene delight of "A Golden Autumn."

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